



IS SKIN DEEP, IS FATAL

H. R. F. KEATING

BLOOMSBURY READER

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1

Which one? The red-head in the dark green jersey-wool swim-suit clinging to every sun-tanned undulation? Or the blonde lifting the big red and white beach-ball high into the air above her head ready to throw?

Police Constable Peter Lassington, comfortably at ease, off duty, free from the constant watchfulness of the London streets, could not make up his mind.

The blonde in the percale cotton bikini all wet from the sea and practically transparent? The red-head with the long tanned legs lying looking between half-closed eyelids at the gleaming twin-tub washing-machine just behind her? Or, what about the one in the new rainbow-striped two-piece, the one kneeling back on her heels that way looking up at the man in the sports car?

Peter Lassington sighed.

The phone rang.

He picked up the receiver.

‘Regent 1129.’

‘That you, Mr Lassington?’

He tried to place the voice. It was familiar. A woman’s. A bit out of breath. Puffy. And worried.

‘Yes,’ he said cautiously.

‘Listen, you ought to come round. Come round, quick.’

The voice obviously felt that enough had been said. It panted hoarsely down the line. Silent, waiting.

‘Come quick?’

A policeman stationed and living in the Soho area develops a certain natural caution about mysterious telephone calls. Caution on two fronts. A natural disinclination to get involved, and a carefully cultivated playing it by ear when certain friends, or half-friends, want to convey information. Or half-want.

And at the present moment on a February morning of sleeting, chill, implacable rain the natural disinclination was perhaps a little stronger than it ought to have been in a thoroughly keen and efficient young police officer.

The woman at the other end of the line had been thinking. She had arrived at the conclusion that not quite enough had after all been said. She breathed more hoarsely for a few seconds and then broke into speech again.

‘Round to Fay’s Place,’ she said.

And at once Peter Lassington knew who was speaking. Fay’s maid. A picture of her formed in his mind’s eye, not exactly the sort of picture he preferred in that private viewing theatre, but obtrusive. Difficult to push out. The enormous form rising like a squat pyramid from hips of elephantine proportions to some wisps

of residual hair clinging for dear life on to a greasy tortoise-shell comb.

Fay Curtis's old maid.

'Yes, what is it?' he said urgently.

'You'd better come. Fay's dead.'

'Dead? Dead? What do you mean, dead? How –'

But with a last horrendous asthmatic wheeze Fay's maid had rung off.

Peter Lassington sat upright in his comfortable fireside chair and thought hard.

He looked across at his wife sitting with her sewing by the light of the window. If light was the right word for the cold, grey stuff that crept in from the cold, grey day.

'Just heard something,' he said. 'Bit odd. Think I'd better pop round there. Won't be ten minutes.'

Mary looked up from the neat patch on the pillowcase in her hands to the steady grizzling rain outside. And from the rain to the magazine on her husband's lap.

'Well,' she said, 'anything would be better than reading that, I suppose. I can't think why you bring me it every week. You're the only one who ever looks at it.'

Peter grunted as he heaved himself up from his chair.

‘Can’t think why you don’t like it,’ he said. ‘Some pretty smashing swim-suits in it. You ought to get yourself one.’

Mary smiled down at her sewing.

‘Can you see me bothering with choosing which silly new bathing costume I’m going to have for next summer?’ she asked.

In the narrow hallway, where he was already reaching down a heavy mackintosh from the little row of bright-knobbed pegs, Peter Lassington laughed.

‘It’s a good job I picked you to marry,’ he said, ‘since we’ve got to exist on a constable’s pay.’

He opened the front door and hurried downstairs and out.

The rain, like so many ranks of imperturbably British grenadiers, was beating itself stupid against the yellowish grey stones of the pavement. Peter turned up his collar and hunched his shoulders.

He set off through the familiar streets of Soho cutting his way through, nipping along the occasional roadless court, making quick progress in spite of the thickening crowds of typists and shop assistants drably plunging through the unremitting rain in search of early lunches. He glanced at them as he strode along but had to admit that, for all their gay coloured umbrellas and glossy mackintoshes, they were not an enlivening sight. Perhaps the cold was to blame. Few feminine charms can struggle successfully against the all-embracing hug of the good, thick, woolly cardigan.

He hurried on past the familiar shops, the little foreign groceries with windows crowded with Polish pickled herrings, Italian sausages, poppy-seed covered loaves and businesslike cans of the favourite foods of half a dozen countries.

In the doorway of a chemist's shop he paused for a moment and looked up at the rain to see whether it was worth waiting a few seconds for some faint slackening. Through the dripping plate-glass window the massed attractions registered on his mind – the cough medicines, bathroom scales, toothpastes, hair coloriser, slip-on fingernails, stick-on eyelashes, a pyramid of little dark brown bottles of vital energy tablets and under these, perhaps significantly, a single tube of babies' teething jelly.

But at Fay's Place Fay was dead. He put his head down again and plunged on.

Past sandwich bars already beginning to attract sodden queues of customers; past cleaners' shops with their rows of hanging dresses steadfastly awaiting collection; past bookshops with their arrays of volumes dedicated, as their notices said, to 'art, science and the medical' or, to put it more prosaically, to sex; past still fairly empty pubs, darkly painted, corniced and curlicued and smelling of draught beer.

And in less than ten minutes he was at Fay's Place.

Few of the hurrying lunch-seekers would have even noticed that it was there. To the outward world at this hour of the day it

presented simply one door, painted purple once and subsequently covered with successive layers of London grime, and above it one small, extinguished neon sign saying palely 'Fay's Place'.

Police Constable Lassington pushed with his gloved hand at the apology for a door. It swung ajar indifferently.

He stepped quickly in.

The corridor ahead was unlit and if there were any windows they made little difference. But he knew his way and plunged on confidently along past grimy walls and down a narrow flight of stairs with a sharp twist in it. At the bottom there was another door, crudely painted in bright red with the legend 'Fay's Place' once again, this time in sloping irregular white letters.

Again Peter Lassington put out a hand and pushed. The door clicked open and flopped right back.

He hurried in.

At this early time of day the clubroom was unable to rise to its expected level of brazen gaiety. It was unfairly handicapped, to begin with, by being lit not by the discreet wall-lights in pink shades but by one single central bulb of feeble power and feebler intentions. The only window stared fishily at the unaccustomed scene and contributed no more than a dirty expanse of lustreless grey. On the surfaces of the rather old hat black glass-topped tables the rings where last night's pools of alcohol had dried up could still be seen. The tables had been divorced, too, from their little tubular

chairs and could not, deprived of this support, muster much of an air of inviting liveliness.

Even the summertime abandon of the beach scene painted behind the little bar was no longer able to give out any very positive spirit. Its long-legged girls with their acceptably rounded posteriors and uniformly pert bosoms were no doubt making a vigorous effort to create an atmosphere of sophisticated sexuality. But in the nature of things they were bound to fail.

Peter Lassington bit his lower lip and called out cautiously.

‘Anybody at home?’

The tawdry gold and black curtain beside the bar screening off the inner part of the club parted suddenly.

‘Pete. What are you doing here, my old beaut?’

It was Jack Spratt. Detective-Constable James Spratt.

He stood holding back the flimsy curtain and looking at Peter with a questioning tilt to his customary broad grin.

Peter, like almost everybody who found Jack barging into their world, grinned back.

‘You here on business?’ he asked.

Jack ducked his head under an imaginary bombardment of vexations and grinned again.

‘Wouldn’t come for me health, old darling,’ he said. ‘Though I s’pose you have.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you. Constable Lassington. You ought to be out there in the rain pounding that old beat, boy. Not noseyparking into a highly unrespectable joint like this.’

Peter relaxed under Jack’s warmth.

‘Not on duty, me,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you’ve forgotten up there in C.I.D., but we get time off sometimes in the uniform branch.’

‘Go on,’ Jack answered cheerfully, ‘you’d give your back teeth to be in the C.I.D., you know you would.’

Peter smiled back at him.

‘What if I would?’ he said. ‘It’d make a change.’

‘So you come round here trying to get in on the act?’

‘Just what sort of an act is it?’

‘Come and have a look if you like,’ Jack said carelessly. ‘But no advice.’

‘All right, mate. I’ll let you muddle along on your own then.’

Jack whirled round.

‘You won’t, you know,’ he said.

He let the irrepressible grin break out again.

‘I’d like to see you keep your filthy little claws off any C.I.D. business once you get within a mile of it,’ he went on. ‘I know you,

matey. There's nothing you want more in the world than to get into the old plain-clothes racket.'

Peter smiled. A self-contained, almost secretive smile.

'That's what you think,' he said.

'I do, me old beaut. I think it, and I know it. What about the way you're busy collecting yourself a little crowd of snouts? I dare say that's why you came in here. And I know darn well it's the reason you're always in and out of old Bill Sprogson's shop.'

'Bill Sprogson? What do you mean, Bill Sprogson?'

Jack grinned like a cannibal.

'What do I mean Bill Sprogson? I mean you hang about that collection of filthy books he's pleased to call a shop, so that he'll feed you with bits of news he picks up about who did any jobs round about.'

'Well, what if I do?'

'Nothing, boy, nothing. Only if you are going to try to get yourself a private snout, you want to go about it a bit more clever. You don't want half the world to know.'

'Oh, go on. Just because you happened to see me once in his place.'

Peter was doing his best to hide his annoyance. But it was not a very good best.

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘let’s see old Fay, for heaven’s sake. I haven’t got all day.’

‘No?’ said Jack.

He grinned again and led the way into the back parts of the club.

In a tiny, lilac-coloured bedroom off a short corridor, painted some time ago in an unsuccessful shade of pink, Fay Curtis, presiding nymph of the earnestly striving haunt of vice that bore her name, lay dead. At her elbow her last cigarette was crushed wetly into a glass ash-tray advertising a brand of beer by means of a brightly coloured portrait of a girl in a low-cut dress.

Peter noticed the heavy daub of violet lipstick at the tip of the half-smoked butt and was able to imagine quite clearly enough the cigarette itself as it passed the last moments of Fay Curtis’s life drooping from the corner of her too much made-up mouth.

She was lying sprawled on a vague divan with a mess of tattered-looking candy-striped lilac sheets under her and a hopelessly inefficient flopsy pillow near her head. Peter could see, more clearly than in life, how the henna hair gave way as it approached the skull to a coarse obstinate grey. The scrawny neck lay no longer concerned about its harsh wrinkles and unprotected by the faded housecoat with its pattern of huge, bright poppies.

‘Poor old Fay,’ Peter said. ‘What happened?’

‘Gas, of course,’ Jack answered cheerfully. ‘Still, she’ll never have to pay the bill.’

‘Who found her?’

‘Big fat old girl. Calls herself a maid.’

‘Yeah, I know her. She rang me, as a matter of fact.’

‘Did she? Looks as though she was on the game once upon a time to me. Got a tattoo mark on her wrist. Lot of those old-timers had that.’

‘My, my,’ Peter said, ‘what will Sherlock Holmes spot next? That cigarette ash, my dear Watson, number 89 in my monograph.’

‘No. But I’ll tell you what I haven’t spotted,’ Jack answered.

‘What’s that, then? The murder weapon?’

‘Murder weapon, my fanny. You won’t come across a more routine suicide than this one, not if you do get to spend the rest of your blessed life in the C.I.D.’

‘All right, then, what haven’t you spotted? You tell me what it is, and I’ll show you where it is.’

‘You won’t, you know. Because it’s not here. That’s what.’

Jack grinned at him in enjoyment of his self-made mystery.

‘All right,’ Peter said, ‘if you won’t tell me I can’t help you.’

‘No, go on,’ Jack said, caught up in his game, ‘go on, guess what it is.’

‘What is this? A quiz programme?’

‘No. No, it’s a perfectly good question. Test of detective abilities. Here you are, old woman dead on her bed, smell of gas, door and window blocked up, more or less. Perfectly routine suicide. So what’s missing?’

‘I give up.’

Jack’s eyes gleamed.

‘You can’t give up yet. You got three guesses.’

‘Oh, come off it.’

‘No, go on. Three guesses. I tell you it’s a perfectly reasonable test of your ability.’

‘Go on. Who do you think you are? Chief lecturer at detective school?’

‘You couldn’t guess in a million years.’

The grin was cheeky now.

‘Oh, couldn’t I?’

Peter Lassington’s eyes squinted slightly in concentration.

‘Shilling in the gas,’ he said.

‘Clever stuff, clever stuff. But miles out. I told you: there’s no reason at all to think this is anything but a perfectly routine suicide. So what’s missing?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. The old girl’s garters.’

‘That’s two. One more.’

Peter's lips pursed in unlocated annoyance. Jack still grinned equably.

And suddenly Peter laughed.

'Quite simple,' he said.

'All right, if it's so simple, what is it?'

'A note. A suicide note. They all write them, and I can't see one anywhere. You'd know it a mile off if she'd left one, too. Got a fist like a cow and always uses purple ink.'

'That so? You really know her then?'

'Listen. Am I right? Yes or no?'

'Okay. You win. No note.'

Jack took his defeat cheerfully.

'It's odd, you know,' he went on. 'I mean, they almost always do leave a note.'

'And you've really looked everywhere?'

'Turned the place inside out. Best detective school tradition. Start from point near door, work round systematically in a clockwise manner. Constable Spratt, which way is clockwise? Please, sir, don't know, sir. Can't tell the time, sir.'

'And not a sausage?'

'Not a sausage.'

'So she didn't leave a note then,' said Peter.

‘Very splendid piece of logical reasoning, Constable Lassington.’

‘But I wonder what made her do it? Any ideas?’

‘Cor, wouldn’t you feel like turning it in sometimes if you kept a place like this?’

‘The club? It’s all right.’

‘But tatty.’

‘No, you should see it in business hours. Looks a bit more like it then.’

Peter slipped a comb from his pocket, ran it twice through his well-groomed hair, and began a slow, seductive dance in the cramped little bedroom where Fay Curtis had put an end to her life.

‘You used to come here then?’ Jack said. ‘With Mary?’

‘Don’t be stupid. What do you think a girl like Mary would want in a place like this? No, I’ve looked in once or twice on duty. When there’s been a bit of a row or something.’

‘Can’t have been very often then. Old Fay kept things pretty quiet. I often thought she must have something going on as well as the club, the way she took such care not to have trouble.’

‘Yep, could be.’

Peter shrugged.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I quite liked the old girl. Used to stop and chat sometimes in the afternoon. If I happened to be passing and things were quiet.’

‘You know,’ Jack said, ‘that could be why she took the quick way out.’

‘What could be?’

‘That she was up to her old neck in some racket, and things were getting too hot for her in some way or another.’

Peter looked down again at the thin body in the garish, poppy-splodged housecoat on the tangled lilac sheets of the divan.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘that should be easy. Have you got anything on her? Were those smart operators of the C.I.D. about to move in?’

‘No,’ Jack said. ‘Looked it up before I came away, me old beaut. Jack’s the boy for efficiency.’

‘And there was nothing?’

‘Not really. Some of the boys thought she was up to something, spot of the old procuring maybe. But there wasn’t a thing to go on.’

‘So your theory doesn’t look too bright, lad.’

Jack shrugged cheerfully.

‘Dunno,’ he answered. ‘It still could be. Takes time for some of these rackets to show their lovely little heads. So she may have been busy at something for all we know. Someone may have been putting the black on the old trout. Anything.’

‘Seen the maid?’ Peter asked. ‘Funny, I know her quite well in a way, but I’m damned if I know what she’s called.’

‘Yep. She’s in the little bit of kitchen out there. Brewing up, I dare say. Couldn’t get much out of her. Just that she came in this morning and found old henna hair the way she is now.’

‘Really? The old duck always seemed chatty enough to me.’

‘Oh, yes. Chatty as all get out. But when you come to look at it: damn’ all.’

‘S’pose you’re right really. Great one for her aches and pains. Very smart on the weather. But not much else.’

‘Did you say she rang you?’

‘Yes.’

Peter suddenly smiled.

‘Dare say she didn’t much like the look of what the station sent round,’ he said.

‘That’s all right by me, boy. They don’t have to like the look of it, not when they get to her age.’

The door of the scruffy little room opened slowly. Outside in the corridor stood the subject of their conversation. If she had overheard their not precisely warm-hearted comments, she appeared to bear no ill will.

Her immense body blocked the whole doorway. Indeed, it was a matter for speculation how she ever succeeded in getting the vast width of her hips in through the narrow gap to offer her mistress whatever ministrations she was accustomed to perform.

‘I made a drop of tea,’ she said. ‘It’s what you want at a time like this, that’s what I say. Nothing like a good cup of tea when there’s trouble. Sort of warms you.’

‘That’s my girl,’ said Jack.

As there was no sign of the tea itself he moved forward to go to the kitchenette somewhere in the background. The enormous bulk of the maid wobbled round in front of him and set off along the narrow corridor, brushing the ill-painted pink walls on both sides with the vast delicately-flowered apron that covered her middle area. Peter followed.

At the door of the kitchenette the old duck turned and contrived to pass two big cups of milky tea out through the gap where her pyramidal figure left a space. Jack handed the first cup to Peter and took the second himself. They drank.

‘Yes,’ said their huge companion, ‘I thought I might as well phone through to you, too, Mr Lassington. What I say is, when you’re dead you might as well be looked after by someone you know. It’d be more of a comfort like.’

‘Expect you’re right,’ said Peter.

In the circumstances it was a judicious comment.

‘Yes. Well, I know what I should feel if I’d done it. And mind you, there’s many a time I’ve thought of it. I won’t hide that from you. Many a time.’

‘Have you now?’ Jack said.

He grinned in unalloyed friendliness.

‘Course I have. You don’t think my life’s been all roses and butter, do you? The trouble I’ve had in my time. First it was my figure was too good. Then it kept somehow going to pieces.’

She took a swig of the milky tea with a gratifying slurp and contemplated those parts she could see of the figure that had so spectacularly gone to pieces.

‘Still,’ she said, ‘I dunno what made her do it in the end. ‘Course, she didn’t tell me everything. I knew that. Sort of close, she was. Always the same, even in the old days when we was girls together. Never told you everything she was thinking, she didn’t.’

The milky tea was drained to the last milky dreg.

‘No,’ she went on, ‘now I’m different.’

It took her some time to explain to her own satisfaction the whole extent of her differences from her late employer. When she had finished Jack cheerfully thanked her for the tea, made no comment on her psychological exposé, and announced that he might as well be pushing off.

‘I’ll come too,’ Peter said.

‘Ta ta, then, dear,’ said Fay Curtis’s ex-maid. ‘Be seeing you, I dare say.’

She began manoeuvring her quivering bulk round to face into the little kitchenette. Peter and Jack walked back through the

conscientiously sexy clubroom and past the flimsy door which divided its gaieties from the drab world outside.

Peter puffed out a sigh.

‘How’s Sheila?’ he asked.

‘Oh, she’s all right, boy. Mary okay?’

‘Yes. Much as usual. Kids all right?’

‘Kids. Don’t give me kids. I don’t know why we ever have them.’

Peter laughed.

‘You ask Mary,’ he said. ‘You hear the way she goes on, you’d think there was nothing else in the world but having a family.’

‘Then you take my advice, me old darling. You stick to your guns. Keep off ’em. Once you start ’em, you might as well give up being married for all the joy you get out of it.’

‘You try and convince Mary of that, that’s all. Hey, you know old Fay had a daughter, don’t you?’

Jack laughed.

‘It’s June,’ he said. ‘Her name’s June Curtis.’

Peter looked surprised.

‘You mean the June I’ve heard you on about?’

Jack linked his two forefingers tightly together and twirled them expressively.

‘That’s the one,’ he said.

‘And did you know who her Mum was?’ Peter asked.

‘Didn’t have a clue. Listen, lad, when I get stashed up with a female like June, you don’t think we discuss family trees, do you?’

‘No, s’pose not. And I expect she wasn’t too proud of her old Mum anyway. Might look a bit dicey for a future Miss Globe to have an old lady keeping a joint like Fay’s Place.’

‘You could be right. June’s certainly a good bet for Miss Globe, anyhow.’

They reached the creaky old door to the street. Jack laid a hand on Peter’s shoulder.

‘Listen, mate,’ he said. ‘You know what she’s doing today?’

‘June? No.’

‘Miss Valentine contest.’

‘But that’s just round the corner. At the Whatsit Ballroom. The Star Bowl.’

‘Yes. That’s it. Look, there isn’t really any need for June to know about this straight away. I’ll be seeing her tonight after it’s all over. I’ll tell her then. But we don’t want her getting depressed. When she gives those judges the works, they want to be good and cheerful works. Means a lot, winning tonight.’

‘Yes, I know. The Star Bowl’s on my beat. Often stop outside and have a quiet read of all the posters. It’s a big step on the way to the Miss Globe show.’

‘You bet it is. And you know what that’s worth to the winner?’

Jack winked.

‘All of twenty-five thousand nicker by the time she’s finished, my old beaut. So just get out of that girl’s way. She’s rarin’ to go.’

‘I’ll bet she is.’

Peter looked out at the street. The rain knew its duty. England expects. It had not let up an inch.

Peter turned up his collar.

‘Well, you going back to that cosy little C.I.D. office?’ he said.

‘Got to hammer out a report, boy. But, cheer up, you’ll make it there one day. Just when you’re going to retire.’

Jack grinned like a savage and Peter dug him hard in the ribs. He stood on the rain-edged worn step as Jack, still smiling all over his face, plunged off in the direction of the station.

He gave him a full minute to get clear and then turned and pushed the old purplish door open once more. With lips pursed as if to whistle he set off along the narrow grimy little corridor.

2

Police Constable Peter Lassington went quickly down the stairs of Fay's Place – soon to be named something else in the unavoidable absence of the presiding nymph – through the clubroom with its patiently waiting glass-topped tables, past the once inviolable black and gold curtain and into the little, slatternly private world of the late Fay.

‘Hey,’ he called out. ‘It’s me. Me. Peter Lassington. There’s something I want to ask you. Just thought.’

He advanced along the short corridor towards the kitchenette. The huge bulk of Fay’s maid emerged.

Somehow she found room to get her great, fat-encased arms akimbo on her rolling hips.

‘Yes?’ she said.

The consumption of another two or three cups of over-milky tea had not noticeably sweetened her views on life. Rather the opposite. There was a new aggressive note in her wheezy voice.

Peter Lassington looked at her sharply.

‘Little thing I wanted to ask you,’ he said.

‘I thought there might be.’

The coarse eyebrows in her narrowing forehead descended with dark meaning.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘it’s no use you smiling like a bleeding crocodile. You can’t put nothing past me.’

‘But what do you think I want to put past you?’ Peter said. ‘I only came back just to ask something.’

Her two bleary eyes looked from side to side.

‘What you might be wanting to put past me I wouldn’t rightly know,’ she answered. ‘But I warn you: I won’t stand for it.’

‘But listen,’ said Peter. ‘There’s only one simple question I’d like to ask you. It’s just that I didn’t want the other chap, Jack, to hear.’

‘I dare say you didn’t. There’s questions and questions.’

There could be no doubt of the effect of milky tea in intensifying the elements of the suspicions in the old duck’s mind.

Peter made an effort to keep calm.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘I just wanted to ask whether you knew anything about a note. A note she – A note Fay might have left.’

‘Ah.’

Suspicions apparently confirmed.

‘Ah,’ she repeated. ‘He asked me that.’

‘Jack?’

‘How should I know his name?’

‘The chap, the detective, who was here with me.’

‘Who else?’

Peter looked disappointed.

‘And you told him you hadn’t seen a note?’ he asked.

‘Course I did.’

‘Oh, well, thank you. Thought I’d just ask. There’s no need for the C.I.D. blokes to be first with everything.’

He turned away.

‘You don’t think I didn’t know he was C.I.D., do you?’ the wheezy voice came from behind him.

He looked back over his shoulder.

‘No, of course you knew he was C.I.D.’

As he reached the end of the little, shabby, pink-painted corridor the sound of her heavy breathing was still audible.

‘That’s why I didn’t tell him any more than I had to,’ she said.

Peter swung round.

‘You didn’t tell him any more than you had to?’

‘Course not. C.I.D., see. You don’t think I’d go out of my way to help that lot? Not after all these years.’

‘No,’ Peter said.

He checked a rising excitement.

‘No, I suppose you wouldn’t.’

‘That’s why I rung you, see.’

‘Yes; I wondered about that.’

‘I knew you was a friend of Fay’s like. I knew that much.’

‘Yes. I was a friend of Fay’s.’

‘That’s why I rung you.’

‘Quite right.’

For three or four long wheezing breaths she contemplated her own wisdom in making that telephone call.

Peter kept looking at her.

‘And there was something you might have told Jack, if he hadn’t been C.I.D.?’ he asked.

‘Those bleeders,’ Fay’s ex-maid said.

Peter waited.

‘Those bleeders. Nothing but chase, nothing but ask.’

‘Made your life pretty miserable at times I dare say,’ Peter put in.

The bleary eyes darkened once more.

‘And so did you lot. In uniform or out, you’re all the same. Won’t let a poor girl get on with her job, always moving on, always ready to tally up another arrest at a poor girl’s expense. Never thinking what it meant in fines. Fines, fines all the time.’

‘Well,’ Peter smiled, ‘we have to do it, you know.’

It worked.

The eyes under the narrowing forehead lost their dark smoulder.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘you have to do it just the same as us, I suppose. We’re all the same under the skin. That’s what it comes down to. Under the skin.’

‘So you didn’t tell old Jack too much?’

‘I didn’t tell him about the letter Fay wrote, that’s what.’

‘Letter? What letter?’

She shook her droopy bloodhound cheeks.

‘Ah,’ she said, ‘I knew something was wrong when old Fay took to writing a letter. She didn’t do that, not once in five years she didn’t.’

‘No, I suppose she wouldn’t.’

But the reflective note was a mistake. It had the undesirable effect of setting the huge bulk of humanity off on a private reminiscent jag all of her own. A long, slow, silent reminiscent jag.

After a clear two minutes Peter could stand it no longer.

‘This letter,’ he said, ‘what happened to it?’

‘What happened to it?’

The dulled eyes lit up.

Peter held his breath. But more prompting was evidently required.

‘It went in the post?’ he asked.

A fit of puffy giggles emanated.

Peter waited again.

‘In the post,’ he said at last. ‘She put it in the post?’

‘No.’

A note of contempt.

‘You know old Fay. Wouldn’t stir out if she didn’t have to.’

Just in time Peter checked himself from making a general observation about the late Fay’s dislike of leaving the close world of her own ‘Place’. Another period of reflection on general matters would be altogether too much for his patience.

‘You took it for her,’ he said. ‘You didn’t happen to notice who it was to, did you?’

‘I know who it was to all right.’

Peter smiled.

‘Very natural to look,’ he said. ‘And who was it to, then?’

‘It wasn’t natural to look.’

Peter held his face blank.

The huge mass of human flesh in front of him plainly saw that she had achieved a degree of power. She savoured it.

‘You’d like to know all about it, wouldn’t you, Mr Nosey Parker?’ she said. ‘There’s nothing you’d like better, is there? Nothing you’d like better than to know just what name there was on that there envelope?’

‘I wouldn’t mind knowing,’ Peter said.

To the forces of power submission is too often the only practical answer.

‘You wouldn’t mind knowing. I bet you wouldn’t, my lad. I bet you’d give a lot to know that.’

Peter ran the tip of his tongue along his lips.

‘I’d give a penny or two,’ he offered.

‘Penny or two. I bet you would. You can spare it.’

‘Spare it?’

‘Yes. I bet you policemen get a fat wage packet come Fridays.’

‘Wages. Don’t make me laugh.’

‘And pickings, too.’

‘What do you mean pickings?’

‘Motorists.’

The bleary eyes rose magnificently to a definite gleam.

Peter looked at her with momentary bewilderment.

‘Motorists?’

‘Yes. Pound note wrapped round the licence when you ask to see it. I know why you persecute the poor motorist.’

A sudden uncontrollable fit of laughter swept over Constable Lassington.

‘You’ve been listening to the A.A. or something,’ he said. ‘The persecuted motorist.’

She shifted her huge pyramid of flesh uneasily.

Peter saw that the balance of power had turned. As accidents occasionally do turn it.

He launched his attack.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘joking apart, who was that letter addressed to? Come on, now.’

And Fay’s ex-maid came on.

‘Teddy Pariss,’ she said. ‘It was to Teddy Pariss, if you must know.’

‘Teddy Pariss, the dance halls’ owner? And posted last night?’

‘Ah, you don’t know everything.’

Peter pounced hard on this trace of defiance.

‘Did it catch the last post? Yes or no?’

‘Didn’t catch no post at all, clever.’

‘Ah, you took it round for her, did you? Where did you take it?’

‘Where did you think I took it?’

‘I’m asking you where you took the letter.’

Years of being at the wrong end of police questioning have their effect. Fay’s maid, Fay’s former maid, spoke up.

‘I took it round to that Star Bowl dance place. Where else? That’s one of his places, isn’t it?’

‘And when did you deliver it?’

‘Only this morning, if you must know. It was raining bleeding cats and dogs last night, so I says to myself “What’s the point of going round out of my way only to get wetter?” So I took it round this morning. Raining worse then.’

She stood there in front of him wheezily contemplating the perversities of the British climate.

Peter left her where she stood.

But at the door of the clubroom he paused.

‘This’ll be one in the eye for Detective-Constable Spratt,’ he said loudly.

Fay’s maid – now out of employment – did not appear to hear.

In the still determinedly dutiful, cold and uncompromisingly unpleasant rain Police Constable Peter Lassington, gloved hands thrust into his coat pockets, marched through the Soho streets again. By now the narrow pavements were thick with people pushing along in the sombre hunt for something to eat at a competitive price. Men with folding mackintoshes and old briefcases jostled girls with heads encased in folding rain-hoods. Sometimes they jostled by mistake, sometimes on purpose. Elderly female shop assistants with iron-crimped hair under small but stout umbrellas made their way purposefully to the exact spot they had determined on as giving the

best value in hot lunches. Grubby little men without briefcases paused in the slogging rain for a few restful moments in front of the photographs outside a strip club.

The sights and sounds were depressingly familiar to Peter. He must have passed by the restaurant trade clothier's with its ever-smiling dummy in white apron and tall chef's hat a hundred times. The barber's shop a bit along the street, painted a dull green and with a dust-covered scatter of birth control packets in the window, was the place where once a fortnight he got his hair trimmed to the regulation shortness. The pawnshop round the corner had never, to his knowledge, changed its display of massive silver sporting cups, candelabra and punch bowls. They gave the establishment its air of respectability: they served.

Even the Star Bowl ballroom on the edge of Soho was a sight he knew as well as his own front door. He had inspected the big, bright posters advertising the Miss Valentine contest for the first time three weeks before. Their every detail was now utterly familiar to him, except that a thin sticker had been pasted across each one with the repeated words 'Tonight Tonight Tonight'.

In the shelter of the porch roof a few well-soaked passers-by were standing, trying to make up their minds to face the full unpleasantness of the day again. Presiding over them, resplendent in a deep orange uniform with midnight-blue tassels, was a doorman.

Peter knew him as well as he knew the posters.

‘Mr Pariss here?’ he asked him confidentially.

‘I’ll say he is,’ the doorman answered.

He turned his eyes up to the low grey sky. There was meaning in the look.

‘Tell me something,’ Peter said. ‘You didn’t happen to get a note for him this morning – from a big, fat old girl, bit short of breath?’

‘Cor. Her,’ said the doorman.

‘Has Mr Pariss had it yet?’

The doorman chuckled.

‘Lord, no,’ he said. ‘You should see it in there. He’s got no time for letters. We’ve got the girls in.’

Peter made a face, as much as to say he understood.

‘What would have happened to a note like that then?’ he asked.

‘Secretary took it off me. I showed her where it was marked “Private”. “I won’t open it,” she said. Hoity-toity.’

‘Think I’ll step in,’ said Peter.

‘Have to unlock for you then,’ the doorman said. ‘It’s like a zoo in there. Only you have to keep the animals out as well as in.’

It was a duty he appeared to relish. With a smile ready to burst out the moment onlookers went away, he took out a key and surreptitiously unlocked a side door in the big array of swinging glass which made up the ballroom entrance.

‘Thanks, mate,’ Peter said.

In the deep-blue carpeted foyer, which when the Star Bowl was open set off so well the dark orange of the doorman’s uniform, Peter paused for a few moments. He let the warm, moistureless air dry off the outer layer of wet on his mackintosh, hat and gloves. Then he set out to locate the owner of so much plush luxuriousness.

It was not difficult.

Down a thickly carpeted corridor, through a pair of swing doors and there he was.

Unmistakably.

In the huge ballroom with its immense, bare, glossy floor and its distant, high, wide stage there could be no looking elsewhere. Though there were people in plenty about, ranging from the cluster of twenty or so girls pressed together against the far wall of the stage to an odd scatter of overalled workmen busy with hammers and paintbrushes, one figure alone compelled attention. In front of the stage there was a narrow raised pathway about four feet high coming out into the ballroom and back in a flattened loop. In front of this was a heavily draped judges’ table. And in front of the judges’ table was Teddy Pariss.

His feet were wide apart. His hard, bulbous body in its sporty Prince of Wales check suit was held back at an angle. The two bulges of flesh at the back of his neck were strained outwards. His

bullet head was tilted. And he was shouting. Shouting with all his might at the would-be Miss Valentines.

‘Now, for the fifty-thousandth time, will you listen?’

The girls pressed even harder against the blue draped curtains which hung at their backs. It was plain that behind the curtains the wall was unyielding.

‘Well,’ Teddy Pariss yelled, ‘are you going to listen? Are you going to do what you’re told? Or do I have to come and bloody well make you?’

The threat had its effect.

‘Yes, Mr Pariss,’ one of the braver girls managed to say.

‘All right, then,’ Teddy Pariss shouted. ‘Now, when the music starts you come out one by one on to the catwalk. You come out in your right order. Any girl too stupid to count?’

And he waited, expecting an answer.

‘All right, then,’ he went on, without the least slackening in his commendably hectoring tone, ‘all right, then, look at the discs on your wrists.’

On the shallow stage the girls glanced down at the big white plastic discs strapped on their right wrists. Some shyly, some sulkily, some slowly, some quickly. But none quickly enough for Teddy Pariss.

‘Come on, come on, we haven’t got all day. I want some bloody lunch at some time or another. Now, hurry up, you stupid lot. Into line, in order.’

He stood looking at them as they shuffled into line. Watching like a great tom-cat ready to pounce.

‘Seven. You, Seven. You dumb cluck. Since when has seven come before six? Move. Move.’

The girl with the number seven disc on her wrist, a small plumpish dark-haired bewildered-looking creature, scuttered into place at last.

‘All right, then? Right. When the music starts, off you go. One, you go right away. Two waits till she gets to the turn of the catwalk and then she goes. Then three and so on. Right. Let’s try it. Charlie.’

Only on this last word did he swing away from the almost mesmerized bunch of beauty queens. Charlie, a sparse-haired, worried man, lifted up his hands and brought them crashing down in an opening chord on the battered rehearsal piano. Up on the stage the girl called One looked nervously from side to side, received a slight push from Two and started off.

‘Sam. Sam, are you timing this?’ Teddy Pariss shouted.

‘Yes, Mr Pariss,’ called a frowsty-looking little fat man nursing a stop-watch in a corner by himself.

The piano thumped out a weary tune. One by one the beauties left their safe huddle, ventured on to the exposed outwalks of the

catwalk, smiled down at the indifferent judges already sitting at their table, completed their lonely circuit and regained the comparative haven of the stage.

When the last of them had rejoined the bunch Pariss turned to his timekeeper.

‘What did they take, Sam?’

‘Eleven minutes, nine, Mr Pariss.’

‘Eleven, nine. Eleven, nine.’

He rounded on the girls up above.

‘What the hell do you think you are?’ he yelled. ‘A lot of bleeding double-decker buses? They won’t want to see all that much of you tonight. Don’t you kid yourselves.’

He turned to the worried-looking piano-player.

‘Charlie, it’s your bloody fault. I told you to tighten that tempo, and what do you do? Damn all.’

‘It’s the girls, Mr Pariss, honest it is. They won’t listen to the music, so I have to slow it down to fit in with them. What else can I do?’

‘You can make them listen to the music,’ Teddy Pariss snarled back. ‘Make them. And if you can’t, I can find some other cheap musician who can.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘You’d better. Now we’ll do the whole thing twice more . . .’

Peter Lassington, who had quietly made his way down the length of the great, glassy ballroom snaked over with black electric cables, took a last quick look at its owner and then darted through the inconspicuous door he had already spotted leading through to the back-stage area.

‘Got you, me lad.’

A pair of hands grabbed his two elbows and held him fast. In the sudden darkness after the bright lights of the ballroom he could see nothing. There was only the two sets of hard fingers digging into his arms.

In a moment he recovered his wits.

He flung himself forward in a single, quick lunging movement.

The grip on his elbows broke. From behind him there came a roar of fury and despair like a great walrus suddenly bereft of its young.

He wheeled round.

‘Bert Mullens. What the hell do you mean by that?’

A pace away Bert Mullens, the stage-door keeper, blinked at him in the half-light.

‘Who – Who is it?’ he said.

‘It’s me, Pete Lassington. Constable Lassington, you silly old fool.’

‘Oh. Oh.’

For a little Bert Mullens could think of nothing to say. He stood blinking away at Peter from under his drooping eyebrows, breathing

heavily.

‘What do you want to go doing a thing like that for?’ Peter said. ‘I might have clobbered you.’

‘I thought you was an intruder,’ Bert Mullens replied lugubriously. ‘Special orders I got against intruders. You don’t know what it’s like, this Valentine business.’

He groaned.

‘Oh, I shan’t half be glad when it’s over,’ he said. ‘You’d think them girls could be smelt out, the way the young layabouts hang around. Like moths, or something. They can scent ‘em from a distance.’

Peter, with the sweat of fear drying all the way down his back, laughed.

‘Smell ‘em out, can they? It wouldn’t surprise me. But tell me something. Mr Pariss, has he got an office here?’

‘Well, no,’ Bert Mullens answered cautiously.

‘But I thought. . .’

‘Not a proper office, he hasn’t. We’re all at sixes and sevens with those dratted girls everywhere. Manager’s office, that’s been turned into a judges’ room. That’s that door there.’

He pointed along the wide passage running behind the stage to a door at the far end.

‘And then next to that there’s a little old junk room,’ he went on. ‘At least that’s what it was. Only I had to spend two days clearing it out. That’s where Mr Pariss has his office. He’ll be out of it tomorrow, I dare say. And I’ll have to move all the lot back in.’

‘It’s a hard life,’ Peter said. ‘And where did you say it was, this junk room?’

‘Round the corner past the manager’s office. It’s the only door round there except into the yard. You can’t miss it.’

Peter set off at a sharp pace.

‘He’s not there, mind,’ Bert Mullens called.

‘That’s all right,’ Peter said vaguely.

He walked along the broad passage and turned to his left by the door of the manager’s office. As Bert Mullens had told him, there was only a short passage in front of him with a room off it on the right and a pair of doors with an iron bar across at the end.

A few quick steps brought him to the office door. He tried it. It opened easily. He stepped in.

The room was small and showed clear signs of how it had been pressed into hurried service for its distinguished occupant. There was a curious mixture of the luxurious and the utilitarian. A thick square of deep red carpet covered only part of the dusty concrete floor. There were no curtains at the main window but underneath it there was an enormous electric fire, close cousin to a cinema organ. In a corner an ancient kitchen chair with one rung missing at the

back rested drunkenly against the wall. But at the desk there was a shining, puffy black leather swing chair of the utmost newness. The desk itself was a shabby, scored office table dragged up from heaven knows where. But on it there had been placed, with fitting reverence, a small collection of choice objects – a heavy silver tray containing a couple of dozen well sharpened pencils and a gold-handled paperknife, a leather-covered tape-recorder and a blotter of a solidity and over-ripeness to grace a royal palace.

The only other piece of furniture was a bright, bouncy divan in unsmirched contemporary colours.

Peter Lassington finished his rapid survey, made sure that the door, which seemed to have no lock, was firmly shut and cautiously approached the desk.

And at once he saw what he wanted. A pile of opened letters was laid out ready to be looked at and on top there was a single still-sealed envelope. It was as big as an envelope could be, pale lilac in colour and a bit grubby. The writing was unmistakable, large, sprawling and clumsily elaborate.

Peter glanced back at the door and stood for a few seconds straining to detect any sound. From the stage, muted by the distance and the closed doors, could be heard the steady thump of the tune that the would-be Miss Valentines were parading to. Otherwise there was silence. Not a voice, not a step.

Peter picked up Fay's letter and stood looking down at its pale lilac between the dark stained leather of his gloves. He held it up to the torpid light of the uncurtained window. But the paper was thick and it was impossible to make out in the least what the envelope contained.

He tried pressing the edges to make the flap come away.

The late Fay had sealed it with industrious energy and it remained firmly stuck along the whole of its length. He lifted it up and breathed hard on it. The faint hope that the warm moisture of his breath might affect the gum seemed to be working out. A tiny wrinkle appeared on the gummed edge.

Peter leant forward and puffed again with all his might.

Behind him the door clicked sharply open.

3

Peter wheeled round, thrusting the big lilac-coloured envelope, the last missive of the late Fay Curtis, behind his back. At the open door, a hand still on the handle, stood Teddy Pariss, recipient of the late Fay's last communication, as yet unread.

And Teddy Pariss's cold toad eyes were gleaming with pallid pleasure.

'Don't I know you?' he said. 'Constable?'

Still holding the big lilac envelope behind his back, Peter licked his lips a little.

'Well, I know you, Mr Pariss,' he answered.

'I should bloody well hope so,' Teddy Pariss replied. 'I don't spend heaven knows how much a year getting my name into the papers for nothing.'

'I have been on duty here once or twice when you've had a big do,' Peter said. 'I expect you saw me then.'

'So I did. I never forget a face.'

Teddy Pariss looked pleased with himself.

Peter let his rigid back muscles relax. With luck the conversation was moving in the right direction.

He smiled a little.

‘That’s pretty good,’ he said. ‘Most people only recognize a bobby when he’s in uniform. You can go up to them in civvies and they think they’ve never set eyes on you in all their life.’

‘Civvies,’ Teddy answered. ‘You out of uniform, now? Got yourself into the C.I.D., eh?’

His protuberant toad eyes flicked hastily round the room.

‘Oh, no. No need to worry,’ Peter said. ‘I just happen to be off duty.’

‘No need to worry. Why should you think I’d worry at the sight of a C.I.D. man? If any worrying’s to be done you’re the one to do it, Constable.’

Peter went taut again. He swallowed.

‘Trespassing in your office, is it, Mr Pariss?’ he said. ‘Dare say I’ll get sent down for eight years P.D. for that.’

The jocularity sounded very forced.

But Teddy Pariss was not listening. The cold eyes were elsewhere.

‘Bloody chilly in here,’ he said at last.

He waddled towards the cinema-organ fire, bent down till the Prince of Wales check of his trousers was stretched to bursting point and clicked on a switch.

He straightened up with a grunt.

‘That’ll warm it up in a tick,’ he said. ‘Bought it specially. There’s no sense in being uncomfortable, that’s what I say.’

He stood, fat little legs apart, in front of the long fire.

A tight smile pushed its way on to his puffy face.

‘Caught you out there all right, didn’t I?’ he said.

Peter grinned ruefully. He had contrived, while Teddy Pariss was switching on the fire, to slip the big lilac envelope on to the desk three-quarters tucked under the heavy silver tray.

‘Yes,’ Teddy went on with deep satisfaction. ‘I changed my mind. Meant to go on rehearsing those damned girls till lunch-time. But I got so fed up with the stupid bitches I decided to come in here and have a bit of a lay down.’

He glanced over at the springy divan and trotting up to the desk unlocked a drawer. From it he took first a bottle of whisky and two glasses and then a piece of white card about a foot square.

He twirled this in the air.

‘Know what it is?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Peter.

He was unable to prevent himself sounding suspicious.

Teddy Pariss laughed.

‘It’s nothing to be frightened of, lad,’ he said. ‘Look.’

He held the card steady for Peter to see.

On it was written in angry capitals the two words ‘Keep Out’.

‘It’s what you might call a vital piece of office equipment,’ Teddy said. ‘I hang it on the door when I feel like it. And I take bloody good care everybody knows it means just what it says. You can stick it up on your way out.’

He tossed the card on to the desk in front of Peter.

‘Yes, I suppose there are times when you want a bit of peace,’ Peter said.

For want of anything better to say.

‘There are times when I want a bit of peace,’ Teddy answered, ‘and there are times when I want a piece of bit.’

He looked over again at the bouncy divan and smirked.

Peter smiled.

There are people who demand ingratiation. And usually get it.

But Peter’s tribute to this universal law was wasted. Teddy Pariss had turned his back. He was leaning forward grunting at the big electric fire.

‘Damned thing,’ he muttered. ‘Even this has gone wrong now. What a bloody place. You come here for a couple of days just to see the Miss Valentines off properly, and what happens? They mess up every damned thing.’

Peter looked at the huge glossy front of the fire. His eye ran along the thick black flex to the plug.

‘Perhaps it isn’t switched on at the wall,’ he suggested.

There was a certain satisfaction in thinking that anything as glossy as the big fire was at the mercy of human error.

Teddy Pariss swivelled his plump figure round to the wall plug.

‘Ah,’ he said.

He bent down farther and fiddled. Peter tipped Fay Curtis’s letter another quarter of an inch under the silver tray with its battery of well-sharpened pencils.

Teddy straightened up.

‘You’re wrong there, lad,’ he said. ‘Wasn’t the switch at all. Time-plug. Got a time-plug on it. Hate coming into a bloody cold room. But I fixed it to switch on too late. Thought I wouldn’t be coming in here till after lunch.’

He uncorked the whisky bottle and poured a liberal tot into one of the glasses. He let the top of the bottle hover over the second glass.

‘You interested in that letter then?’ he said.

And Peter Lassington’s pink and white face – which always made him look at least five years younger than his twenty-seven summers – flushed all over.

Teddy Pariss set down the whisky bottle without having poured out the second glass.

‘Saw you hiding it behind your back the moment I came in,’ he said. ‘Wanted to get a look at it, did you?’

Peter glanced down at the desk in front of him.

‘Come on, lad, pass it over,’ Teddy said. ‘It’s there under the tray, where you pushed it when I turned to look at that bloody fire.’

There was only one thing for Peter to do.

He reached forward, pulled out the big lilac envelope and handed it to Teddy.

Teddy looked at it. He turned it every way round in his podgy fingers.

‘Old Fay Curtis by the writing,’ he said. ‘Haven’t heard a word from her for years. But I’d know her fist anywhere.’

He shot a quick glance at Peter.

‘You know her, don’t you?’

‘Why should I know her?’

‘I’ll tell you why you should know her, lad. Because you’re a copper and you’re stationed in this area. Fay keeps a club somewhere round here. You know her.’

Only then did he let his cold toad gaze leave Peter’s still flushed face.

He reached into the silver tray and extracted from amongst the well-sharpened pencils the paperknife with the gold handle, the handle in the form of a lusciously-curved naked girl.

He flicked another glance at Peter Lassington, standing like a great lemon in front of the shabby makeshift desk.

Slowly he worked the sharp tip of the girl paperknife under the well-gummed flap of Fay's big envelope. Peter watched the thin blade slowly bulge up the paper.

It ripped along inch by inch. When the whole top of the envelope was slit Teddy Pariss put the knife carefully back in its nest of neat pencils.

Once more he looked at Peter.

And with happy slowness he teased the big folded piece of lilac paper out of the envelope. Peter could see the sheet was covered on both sides with Fay's writing. But it would not take many words in that sprawling, badly formed hand to fill a single side.

Teddy Pariss dropped the big envelope on to the solid blotter.

He unfolded the big sheet.

He looked straight up at Peter. He nodded dismissal. Curt and unquestionable.

As Peter wearily pushed a crooked drawing-pin into Teddy Pariss's 'Keep Out' notice he heard a door shut quickly farther along the corridor.

He glanced sharply round.

And found himself looking straight at a completely undressed girl.

He gaped at her. She, standing as stock-still as he, gaped back.

After a little he realized that he knew her. She was one of the beauties, the one who had raised Teddy Pariss's especial ire by not being very sure about the order numbers come in after five. Number Seven. She was Number Seven. The girl with the curly black hair and the plumpish figure.

They stood looking at each other for perhaps twenty seconds, though it seemed longer. The girl's face – her wide, wide eyes, her Cupid's bow mouth, the curls of springy black hair – seemed slowly to be impressing itself on Peter Lassington's brain. She must be young. Not more than seventeen, probably less. Probably sixteen.

Then, in a flash, she turned, leapt back into the manager's office and slammed the door. As Peter hurried up he heard a key turned feverishly in the lock.

A wild outburst of massed giggles followed, coming not from behind the locked door but from round the corner of the passage. Peter took a pace or two forward to see what was happening.

A sight nearly as astonishing as the naked girl met his eyes. Bert Mullens, the lugubrious stage-door keeper, was standing in his glass-walled box surrounded by a tribe of girls only slightly more clothed than the apparition of a moment before.

The giggling was coming from them. And Peter realized why almost at once. From where they were standing, surrounding the sombre Bert Mullens in a welter of limbs and bodies and bobbing

heads, they must have seen their naked colleague and have guessed the reason for her sudden gasp and hasty flight.

Peter marched up to them.

‘Here, Bert,’ he said, ‘what’s going on? I saw a stark naked girl just now.’

The giggles rose to a pitch of wild squeaking.

But Bert Mullens was unexpectedly alarmed.

‘Where?’ he shouted. ‘Where? Is that one of ‘em got away?’

He looked wildly from side to side.

‘I’m responsible, you know,’ he said. ‘Responsible for ‘em all.’

Glaring balefully about, he began trying to count heads – blonde heads, dark heads, red heads, long hair, short hair, curly hair, straight hair, hair piled up high, hair sweeping down low.

He groaned in cold despair.

‘I dunno,’ he said, ‘I think there’s one missing. But I can’t be sure.’

He looked beyond the seething mass of soft limbs to Peter Lassington.

‘You know what they do?’ he said. ‘They change their hair styles. One moment you remember there’s three beehives, and then all of a sudden there’s only two. I can’t keep track of ‘em.’

He pushed his pale, fishy eyes at the face of the girl nearest to him.

‘One of you’s gone, hasn’t she?’ he demanded.

The giggles, which had been simmering gently, boiled rapturously over again.

A blonde beehive – for the time being – grabbed Bert’s arm.

‘She’s in the judges’ room,’ she squeaked. ‘She ran in there and she’s locked the door.’

‘Yes,’ said a red-head, ‘and she’s absolutely –’

Giggles intervened.

‘You’ve got a naked girl in the judges’ room,’ Peter Lassington said curtly.

Bert groaned again.

He pushed his way through the gaggle of partly dressed bodies and went up to the door which the little plump dark-haired girl had locked. He tried it.

‘Stuck fast all right,’ he said. ‘Wish we’d had the lock off this one like we had the locks off all the rest.’

He knocked thunderously at the closed door.

No answer.

‘Lindylou.’ ‘Come on, Lindylou.’ ‘We know you’re there, Lindylou.’

The girls behind Bert began chorusing happily away.

‘Oh, Lindylou Twelvetrees,’ Bert said dolefully, as if worst fears were being realized. ‘I might of known. They’re all really only bloody children, but she’s stupid with it. Come out. Come out.’

He banged on the door with both fists together in a gust of utter fury.

‘Come out, come out, or I’ll. . .’

‘What’ll you do, Bert?’

The voice in the flock of twitterers behind was unidentifiable.

In the new outburst of giggles that the suggestion aroused Bert Mullens turned to Peter.

‘It’s gone one o’clock. It’s my lunch-time,’ he said. ‘You’re a policeman, do something.’

‘Coo, a copper.’

The girls turned their attention to Peter like a flock of starlings alighting on a new perch. Bert Mullens hurried back to his box, looked despairingly at the big clock hanging just inside and the neat sandwich tin on the ledge underneath and went to stick his head out of the door leading to the street. Reluctantly he came back to the scene of activity.

‘Thought it was more Teds trying to get in,’ he said to Peter. ‘I tell you I’ve had everything today. Boys, newspapermen, advertising people, I don’t know what. Even that nasty old man with the filthy books round the corner is hanging about now. It’s not fair. It’s just not fair.’

But this outburst only had the effect of shifting the beauty queens' volatile attention once more.

'Poor old Bert.' 'Here, I'll give you a kiss, Bertie.' 'Never mind, love, we'll be gone tonight, then you can have your own girl round.'

Very quietly Peter Lassington walked away along the broad passage, past Bert's box and out into the street. Behind him he heard a renewed assault on the locked door of the judges' room. He breathed a long sigh of relief.

4

Peter Lassington arrived back at his flat soaked once again by the steady, dutiful, sternly British rain.

As his wife heard his key in the door she called out something he did not entirely hear.

‘What is it? What’s that?’ he shouted as he peeled off his sodden gloves and humped the rain-heavy mackintosh from his back.

The news. You missed the news.’

‘What news, in heaven’s name?’

‘The one o’clock news on the wireless, dear. It’s just this second finished.’

‘So what? Do you think I care if some ruddy politician has said something rude about some other ruddy politician?’

Mary came out to the door of the sitting-room. At once she saw his coat dripping where he had hung it. She bustled up, hooked each damp shoulder dexterously on to a separate gay little peg and began jerking out the coat’s heavy folds.

He watched her for a little.

‘Oh, leave the damned thing, can’t you?’ he said.

‘You men. You’re all alike. You’d have no clothes left in a month if I let you.’

‘I managed perfectly well once. Thank you.’

She turned from fussing over the sodden sleeves.

‘What’s got into you?’ she asked. ‘You’re not generally such a bear.’

‘Nothing’s got into me.’

‘I dare say you want your dinner. It’s ready to dish.’

‘I’m in no hurry.’

‘Well, well. That’s a change anyhow. Usually you’re hanging about the kitchen like nobody’s business on days when you’re not on duty till late.’

‘Well, I’m not hanging about today.’

Mary tossed her neat head.

‘I got some scrag mutton and did it up with butter-beans,’ she said. ‘It smells lovely, and it was ever so reasonable.’

Peter grunted and walked into the sitting-room.

‘What was so important anyhow?’ he asked.

‘Important?’

‘Yes, what was so important?’

Mary came and stood in the doorway looking at him.

‘I never said anything about “important”.’

He wheeled round.

‘Just like a woman. Shouts out about important news on the wireless before you’ve hardly set foot in the place, and then when you ask her what it is two seconds later she’s no idea she said anything.’

Mary laughed.

‘Oh, that,’ she said. ‘It was just that the news ended with a bit about the Miss Valentine contest round at the Star Bowl ballroom.’

‘What? What about it?’

‘Now, now. No need to get so excited. All those bathing beauties. I’m not sure I ought to tell you.’

Peter Lassington stood looking at the neatly arranged row of ornaments on the mantelpiece. He took a long, deep breath.

‘What did it say on the news about the Miss Valentine show?’ he asked.

‘Oh, it was only a bit. Just a sort of laugh to end up with, as it’s Valentine’s Day.’

Peter turned round.

‘Well, what was the bit?’

‘Oh, just that the contest was on tonight and how many entries there had been and everything. I thought you’d be interested because you said something about it the other day.’

‘No need to make such a fuss about it,’ Peter said.

He flopped into his chair by the little glow of the electric fire.

Mary put her two hands on her hips and looked down at him.

‘Aren’t you going to come for your dinner?’ she said.

For a moment he sat glowering. Then he heaved himself up and lumbered into the kitchen.

He was still pushing the butter-beans round on his plate when the telephone rang. He made no attempt to get up and answer it. Mary, who had done full justice to her own cooking, went quickly into the sitting-room.

‘For you,’ she called.

Peter jerked back his chair and came to take the receiver. He listened for a moment and then banged the receiver back and ran out into the little hall.

‘Trouble, love,’ he shouted. ‘Someone doing the office at the Star Bowl. I’m going round. Won’t take two minutes. Ring the station sergeant.’

And his heavy feet were clattering down the stairs.

As he ran through the still crowded streets, past gloomy pubs, garish sandwich bars, tiny clothes-filled cleaners’ shops and window-crammed chemists, he forced his arms into the sleeves of his heavily damp mackintosh. He had still not got the buttons done up when he reached the Star Bowl stage door.

Bert Mullens was busy boiling a big kettle on the gas in his box.

‘Did you ring?’ Peter asked.

‘Ring? Me? You mean the phone?’

‘Yes. Was it you who rang?’

Bert looked at him blankly.

‘Someone rang me and said somebody was doing the safe here,’ Peter barked. ‘You’d better show me where it is.’

‘The safe? Well, I suppose they mean the one in the manager’s office.’

‘Is there another one?’

‘Well, no. Not really. No, I suppose there isn’t.’

Peter looked at him with fury.

‘Come on, then,’ he shouted.

‘But what about the girls? I shouldn’t leave my post.’

‘Damn your post. Come on.’

Shaking his head sadly from side to side, Bert set off along the broad corridor towards the manager’s office, temporarily fallen from grace into a judges’ room.

‘You got the girl out who locked herself in?’ Peter asked.

‘Oh, she come in the end,’ Bert said grumpily.

He stood aside to let Peter go in first.

There were certainly no obvious signs that a break-in had taken place. The room was in good order. All along the big judges’ table sheets of raw pink blotting paper were ranged in line. Pushed into a

corner, the manager's desk had its drawers all safely locked. The two big windows were firmly closed.

Peter hurried over and examined them. The bottom halves were of frosted glass but the tops were clear, if dirty. He looked out. The windows were fairly far from the ground but not so high as to make it impossible for most people to scramble up and get in. They looked out on to a little alley, a dead end running up beside the ballroom building.

Peter opened one of the windows and stuck his head out. The alley was empty. On the side opposite there were no windows but two pairs of blank doors. One of them had the name of a big restaurant painted across in solid ungraceful black letters. Opposite, in a corner formed by a slight projection of the Star Bowl building there was a cluster of dustbins, each again marked with the restaurant's name. It appeared to be a concern much worried about maintaining its rights in all its property.

It would have been possible, but unlikely, for someone to hide in one of the bins and emerge to break into the ballroom. The projecting part of the building would give some cover even in a busy West End lunch-time. But no doubt the restaurant was much too jealous of its rights to permit anybody to occupy its bins, even temporarily.

Peter pulled his head back in. He rubbed his hand over his newly wetted hair.

‘Looks as if I got a wrong tip, unless I was too quick,’ he said.

Bert Mullens grunted.

‘Let’s have a look at the safe all the same,’ Peter said.

He went up to the heavy safe set in the wall, incongruously beside a full-length mirror in an ornate gilt frame. He peered quickly but carefully at the black japanned surface round the lock. But there was not the least sign of anything resembling a fresh scratch.

He straightened up.

‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘I’ll be off, then,’ said Bert promptly.

‘No. Wait.’

Bert looked at him without much interest.

‘What about the office next door?’ Peter said, ‘It is next door, isn’t it? Mr Pariss’s office?’

‘There ain’t no safe there.’

‘I know there isn’t. But the villains may not. They may think because it’s where Mr Pariss hangs out it’s where the money’s kept.’

‘That’s all very well,’ Bert muttered. ‘But I can’t go in there.’

‘Can’t – Why not?’

‘He’s gone and put his “Keep Out” notice up. It’s more than my job’s worth to go barging in there.’

‘I know he’s got the notice up. He asked me to put it there. But this is urgent.’

Bert backed away a few paces. His fish-like face set in a look of purest obstinacy, a thing of art.

‘I’m not going in.’

‘Look, he may have taken the notice down.’

‘He didn’t. I saw it not a few minutes ago. And heard him in there.’

‘Well, if he’s there no one can be doing the place, can they? We’ve only got to find out. Come on.’

He marched round behind the not far from terrified Bert and pushed him out ahead of him. They went along the short length of passage with Teddy Pariss’s office at the end on the right.

The ‘Keep Out’ notice was still in place. They looked at it in silence.

‘See,’ whispered Bert.

‘He may have left it hanging when he went out.’

Peter found he was whispering too.

‘He hasn’t gone out. I’d of seen him if he’d gone out,’ Bert objected.

‘But I can’t hear a sound inside.’

‘He may not be making a sound. There are things that don’t make a sound.’

Peter turned from looking at the closed door and looked at Bert. It was plain from the way his mouth was slightly open with the tongue resting on the lower lip that he had meant what it sounded as if he had.

Peter turned back to the door.

‘I’m going to knock,’ he said.

And quickly he gave a sharp rat-tat just beside the ‘Keep Out’ notice.

Bert Mullens looked as if he wanted to cut and run for it. Peter glared at him.

From Teddy Pariss’s office there came no sound.

‘All right,’ Peter said, ‘I’m going to knock again.’

And he banged at the door almost as loudly as Bert had banged at the judges’ room door when Lindylou Twelvetrees had taken refuge there. But more respectfully.

And still no answer.

‘What did I tell you?’ Peter said. ‘He’s gone out and left the notice up.’

‘I tell you he could never of done. I’m on the watch I am. I have to be with those girls. He couldn’t never get past me.’

Bert had drawn himself up.

‘All right,’ Peter said, ‘I’m just going to pop my head in and make sure everything’s all right.’

‘You do it if you like,’ Bert said listlessly.

There are people who feel that one formal protest is enough.
After that the deluge.

Peter put his hand on the doorknob. He waited. He cocked his head at a listening angle. Behind him Bert Mullens made no attempt to participate.

Peter took a breath and pushed at the door.

It resisted him.

‘Locked,’ he said.

‘Can’t be locked,’ Bert said. ‘Ain’t no lock on that door. We had ‘em all taken off after the Valentine two years ago. One of the girls locked herself in one of the dressing-rooms with a chap. Nasty business.’

Peter pushed at the door again. It certainly showed no sign of budging.

‘It must be locked,’ he said. ‘The office next door has a lock. That girl used it this morning.’

‘Manager wanted it kept,’ Bert replied. ‘I told him it would lead to trouble.’

Peter turned away from the door for a moment.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘you’re certain there’s no lock here?’

‘There’s no lock on that door,’ Bert said firmly. ‘Hasn’t been for two years.’

‘All right, then,’ Peter said, ‘I’m going to break in.’

He stepped back a couple of paces and charged. With a heavy thump his shoulder hit the woodwork. There was a protesting grating sound and the door moved about an inch.

‘Jammed,’ Peter said.

He charged again. The same protesting sound grated out again and the door shot back three inches more.

Peter put his arm through the gap and pressed close to the still resisting door.

‘I think there’s a chair there,’ he grunted. ‘Ah.’

His hand reached the chair and he gave it a swift jerk. The door, with the weight of his body against it, flew sharply back. The little office was left suddenly open to inspection.

But inspection was hardly needed. There, bang in the middle of the room, lay Teddy Pariss. The rich pile of the specially borrowed carpet would have kept him nice and comfortable.

If he had been alive.

5

But Teddy Pariss was not alive. Not possibly. The paperknife with the golden naked-girl handle which was jutting out of the middle of his back ruled that out, definitely.

Nonetheless Peter Lassington went forward into the little office to look at him. But he was mindful of his training not to touch anything and he turned to keep Bert Mullens from following.

‘This is murder, mate,’ he said. ‘There’ll be someone round from the station in a couple of jiffies. My missus was ringing them. You’d better nip back to the stage door to show ‘em the way. Hurry.’

‘Yes,’ said Bert.

He turned to go. His face, pasty at the best of times, had gone greasily white.

‘And don’t let anybody go out,’ Peter shouted after him.

Bert had disappeared round the corner of the passage for little more than a minute before Peter heard him coming back, loudly ushering along the police reinforcements.

Evidently Mary had been impressive on the phone to the station, because Inspector Hammersby had come round himself together with Constable Smith and Jack Spratt. But perhaps it was only because the inspector had taken it into his head to interfere in something he ought to have left alone.

He was certainly in fine fussy form.

‘Murder, murder,’ he was saying. ‘Don’t talk nonsense, man. We can’t have murder all day and every day.’

At the office door he saw Peter.

‘Lassington. Lassington. What’s all this? Did you give this man a message to me?’

‘Looks pretty bad in here, sir,’ Peter said.

‘What do you mean bad?’

Inspector Hammersby came to the wide open door of the little office.

‘That man’s dead. Dead. Somebody’s knifed him,’ he said. ‘This is murder. Lassington, this is murder. Don’t just stand there.’

‘No, sir,’ said Peter.

But there was nothing else to do.

Inspector Hammersby gazed in at the open doorway.

‘Don’t touch anything,’ he said. ‘Do not touch anything. That is an order. Constable, have you been touching things in here?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Well, understand this: nothing’s to be touched. That is an order, a quite definite order.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The inspector looked round and round.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘We’ll treat this as murder. Murder, do you understand?’

Peter said nothing.

Inspector Hammersby looked round two or three more times. Then an inspiration visited him.

‘You there, Spratt. Detective-Constable Spratt. You’ll be of some use in a case like this. It’s murder, you know. We’re treating it as murder. For the time being.’

Peter looked down at the body of Teddy Pariss. The little golden naked girl protruding from the Prince of Wales check of his jacket. Nothing of the slim, sharp blade of the knife could be seen.

‘Yes, murder,’ said Inspector Hammersby. ‘You, Spratt, it’s a good thing we bumped into you just there. Take up a position outside this door and don’t let a soul in. Not a soul, you understand.’

‘Very good, sir,’ said Jack.

He made an effort to repress the grin plainly wanting to burst out all over his face.

‘Now, then,’ the inspector said, ‘we’ll take every precaution. Every precaution. Smith, go round the front and let no one out. No, Lassington, you go to the front. Smith. Smith, you know the way we came in?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Mike Smith smartly.

‘Very well, take up a position there. And let no one out. That is an order.’

‘Very good, sir.’

Mike Smith and Peter hurried off. As they went they could hear Inspector Hammersby saying to no one in particular. ‘This is a Yard matter, a Yard matter.’

He trotted away to find a telephone.

Mike Smith stood beside Bert Mullens’s box and waited to stop anybody leaving. No one attempted to do so. Bert Mullens looked cowed and was uncommunicative. Peter Lassington hurried through the big, shiny ballroom with its black cables snaking across the gleaming floor and stationed himself inside the blue carpeted foyer. He did not attempt conversation with his acquaintance the doorman still presiding with hawk-like vigilance over the few people sheltering from the rain.

The rain was certainly doing splendidly. It had abated not a jot of its steadiness all the long day. If anything it had slowly and carefully expanded it. There was little doubt that it would still be at it, no less implacable, far into the night. It was of the stuff of heroes.

Peter Lassington stared through the many glass doors of the ballroom at the spearing drops. Eventually a dark blue powerful car drew up at the kerb with a quick screech of brakes. A police driver was at the wheel. There were two men in the back. They got out and ran towards the shelter of the porch roof with heads lowered.

The second man, an enormous burly fellow with a huge pinkish face, was carrying a heavy leather suitcase.

They had a quick, sharp word with the doorman, who hurried to let them in and, looking puzzled, pointed Peter out to them.

While the burly man with the case stood looking round the warm, anonymous, spangled foyer his companion, almost as tall and broad but fleshless, came up to Peter.

‘I’m Superintendent Ironside,’ he said. ‘I’m looking for an Inspector Hammersby.’

‘Constable Lassington, sir,’ Peter said. ‘Inspector Hammersby’s round at the back, where the body is. In a little temporary office behind the stage. This way.’

He led the superintendent and his burly companion into the ballroom.

Inspector Hammersby had been filled with delicate concern that nothing should be changed by the least hairbreadth until it had been presented to the Yard men all dewy and fresh and free from any interference for which anyone, however critical, could blame him. So he had made no announcement about the unfortunate thing that had happened to Teddy Pariss and rehearsals for the evening’s show had happily started again after the lunch break. Once more the would-be Miss Valentines were up on the shallow stage with its heavy blue drapes. They had changed into swim-suits now and

looked, if possible, even more deliciously vulnerable than before. But, alas, there was no Teddy Pariss to appreciate them.

Instead, Mr Brown, the Star Bowl manager, who had been cautiously let into the secret about poor Teddy, was doing his level best to fill his late employer's shoes in a befitting manner.

But there was something about his prominent, beaky nose, permanently mottled complexion, thin cheeks and receding chin which stopped him from quite measuring up to the task. Or perhaps it was just the way he tied his spotted bow-tie, or the combination of just that particular check waistcoat worn generally unbuttoned and the creaseless grey flannel trousers.

Whatever it was, he was not half the man the late Mr Pariss had been.

'Twelve. You're late, Twelve,' he shouted as Peter and the others came in. 'I'll see that you lose a point for that.'

But he lacked the original, unforced venom. Twelve answered back.

'I was only putting on my tan stuff,' she said. 'It wouldn't go on right. You can't take a point off me for that.'

'Oh, yes, I can. You wait and see if I don't.'

Superintendent Ironside stopped inside the great glossy ballroom.

'Just a second, Constable.'

Peter Lassington waited dutifully.

The superintendent, standing with his big fleshless hands clasped together in front of him, looked round at the fabricated luxury of the Star Bowl with his quiet eyes beneath his heavy, grey eyebrows. He looked until he had taken in sufficient of the scene. Then he spoke in a voice calculated to reach just so far as he intended and no farther. And, to tell the truth, this was often just to the point where the listener could not quite hear. It made most people crane forward a little when he spoke.

‘Milk,’ he said to the man who must be his sergeant, ‘stay here, please. I want this constable to show me the lay-out at the back. I think someone should keep an eye on these people. I’ll have you relieved in five minutes.’

He looked dispassionately at the group of girls and at the judges, helpers and hangers-on down by the catwalk.

Surprisingly the burly, pink-faced Sergeant Milk produced a labyrinthine wink.

‘I’ll look at that lot all right, sir,’ he said.

He fixed his gaze earnestly on the swim-suited girls on the stage, blue-legged and chill in the big ballroom without packed crowds of onlookers to warm the atmosphere.

Peter smiled cheerfully back. It was after all the expected thing.

‘Right, girls, we’ll do it once more,’ the beaky-nosed Mr Brown called out. ‘When the music starts, you, One, come down to the catwalk. Then along to the turn, stop, smile, show your legs, and on

you go. When she starts off again, Two comes down off the stage. Now think. Think and get it right.'

But his hectoring decidedly lacked the genuine scorn his former employer had so unselfconsciously attained.

'All right, Constable,' said Superintendent Ironside in the same slightly too quiet voice.

Peter started.

'This way then, sir,' he said.

He went carefully down the side of the big, glossy floor and reached the door to the back-stage area without attracting any attention. Superintendent Ironside followed equally unobtrusively.

'Well, Constable,' he said when the little swing door had closed behind them, 'I see you know how to get about without drawing attention to yourself.'

Peter was unable to prevent a sudden blush.

'Now,' the superintendent went on, 'before we go any farther, can you tell me the general lay-out of this delightful palace of pleasure?'

'Yes, sir, I can. I was the one who discovered the body as a matter of fact.'

'That was diabolically astute of you.'

In the gloom Peter looked round sharply. The words were pitched just to the point where it was difficult to be sure they had been said.

Superintendent Ironside's craggy face wore a faint enigmatic smile.

'Go on, Constable,' he said.

'Well, sir, we're at the side of the stage now, as you know. This little corridor runs down to a wide passage going all along the whole back of the stage. There's doors in it leading up to the stage itself on one side, and on the other side there are a couple of dressing-rooms, a rest room and a toilet for the girls. At the far end comes the stage door itself looking out on a back street, with just beside it a little sort of box for the stage-door keeper. Down the other end of the passage there's the manager's office and another little corridor running along to a small temporary office which Mr Pariss was using.'

Superintendent Ironside looked at him from his deep sunken eyes under the aggressive eyebrows.

'You're a talented young man,' he said. 'First, it's moving about unobtrusively, and now it's clarity of explanation. Quite remarkable.'

Once more Peter looked at him hard in the gloom.

'And now, shall we see if you add speed as a guide to your other undoubted attainments?'

'This way, sir,' Peter said, heading down the narrow corridor beside the stage.

He looked comically puzzled. An expression police officers by and large try to avoid.

But Superintendent Ironside was not to meet Inspector Hammersby quite as soon as he would have liked. From behind them, somewhere in the ballroom, there came a sudden bellow of astonishing volume, in a mixture of rage, pain and shock.

The superintendent stopped still.

‘Wait,’ he said.

They could hear a confused jabber of voices. After a few seconds it became clear that it was people asking who someone was.

‘I’ve a feeling I recognized that curious noise,’ Superintendent Ironside said. ‘It had a trace of outraged dignity about it. A policeman’s yell, I think.’

He turned decisively and went back to the little door leading out to the big ballroom.

As soon as he opened it they could see that he had been right. The yell had come from the enormous Sergeant Milk. He was lying now on the shiny dance floor, on his back with his right leg twisted under him in a way that legs ought never to be twisted. There was a knot of bewildered people standing round, but it was possible to see that the sergeant’s deep pink face had faded drastically.

They hurried over.

Milk looked up at the superintendent with big, pain-filled eyes.

‘It’s my leg, sir,’ he said. ‘Broken, I think.’

‘Has somebody sent for an ambulance?’ Ironside asked the crowd.

‘An ambulance? Oh, yes. Yes.’

The beaky-nosed Mr Brown ran distractedly off.

Ironside knelt down beside his sergeant and skilfully manoeuvred his tie down until he was able to release the neck button of the shirt.

‘I suppose it won’t be very long till someone comes,’ he said.

‘I did a damned silly thing, sir,’ said Milk, who seemed to benefit at once from the loosening of the constriction round his thick neck.

‘Most things we do are damned silly,’ Ironside answered, busy still adjusting the sergeant’s enormous bulk to the best advantage.

‘I was looking at those girls, sir,’ Milk went on. ‘I ought to have known better. And then I tripped over one of those blasted cables.’

‘Well, I suppose it’s something to find a man of your age showing so much virility,’ the superintendent said.

Once again a puzzled frown appeared on Peter Lassington’s pink and white face.

The sergeant groaned.

‘I couldn’t really have cared a damn about the girls, sir,’ he said. ‘But listen, you won’t let on to Mrs Milk, will you?’

‘I’ll be as silent as the grave,’ said the superintendent with great solemnity.

He looked up at the bystanders.

‘Anybody here any experience in first-aid?’ he asked.

The sparse-haired worried piano-player surprisingly admitted to attending Civil Defence lectures on dealing with the injured.

‘Then you can look after this man till the ambulance comes,’ Ironside said. ‘It’ll be good practice for you.’

‘Yes, sir. All right,’ said the piano-player.

Although he could have no idea who Ironside was, it did not occur to him to question the order.

‘I’ll be back if anybody wants me, Milk,’ said the superintendent pushing himself to his feet.

‘Lassington,’ he went on, ‘I shall want you to come with me. I’ll need somebody now Milk has deserted us, and you seem to be keen, alert and well-groomed.’

Peter Lassington made no reply. Any reply would have been difficult.

‘Oh, and bring that suitcase,’ Ironside added. ‘The murder bag, as it’s romantically called.’

Peter picked up the heavy leather suitcase, not without a feeling of excitement, and once again they went through the pass-door to the back-stage area. This time they were not delayed in finding Inspector Hammersby.

He met them at the turn of the corridor outside the judges' room. Peter introduced the superintendent.

'Yes, yes,' said the inspector, a little testily. 'Well, we had to have the Yard here. It's murder, you know.'

'So you said when you rang us,' Ironside answered.

'Yes, quite so. Now you'll be pleased to hear I've taken complete charge. I've seen to everything that needs to be done.'

'I'm sure you've been more than efficient,' the superintendent replied gravely. 'Tell me just what you have done.'

'Well, I've kept everybody out, you know,' said Hammersby. 'Kept them well back. I've put a man on the door. A good man, one of my best. Mercy of God we happened to meet him as we got here. Detective-Constable Spratt.'

'Ah, yes. And you've examined the body?'

'The body? Examined the body? Not at all, not at all. I tell you I've kept them off it, all of them.'

Superintendent Ironside raised one shaggy eyebrow.

'Inspector,' he asked, 'your body is dead?'

Peter stepped forward.

'There wasn't any doubt, sir,' he said. 'There's a six-inch knife in his back up to the hilt. But I did stoop down to make sure.'

The superintendent turned to look at him.

'Ah,' he said, 'the always commendable Constable Lassington.'

He turned to Inspector Hammersby.

‘I think I shall have to borrow this young man, Inspector,’ he said. ‘An unfortunate accident has overtaken my sergeant out in the ballroom there. And I like to have someone about.’

Peter quietly got himself to the attention position.

‘To fetch and carry, you know,’ said Ironside.

‘Constable Lassington?’ Inspector Hammersby said. ‘Quite out of the question. Quite out of the question. He’s uniform branch, you know. Uniform branch. Wouldn’t be at all suitable.’

‘Oh, come now,’ said Ironside mildly, ‘the possession of police uniform doesn’t necessarily prevent someone having the rudiments of intelligence.’

The inspector rather obviously did not know what to make of this.

‘I dare say, I dare say,’ he answered. ‘But the fact remains that he wouldn’t be suitable. No, no. I’ll be delighted to lend you Constable Spratt there. Detective-Constable Spratt.’

‘Well, that’s certainly kind,’ said the superintendent. ‘I wouldn’t ask, only we seem to be in the middle of a manpower crisis in the Murder Squad. A most regrettable circumstance.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said the inspector. ‘Really, they should at least keep the Murder Squad up to strength. I saw the other day they had no one at all to send in answer to a provincial request.’

‘Well, I was more concerned at the number of people who have taken it into their heads to kill somebody,’ Ironside replied. ‘But the other matter is serious too. I shall ask for a replacement for the unfortunate Sergeant Milk, but I may have to wait.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Hammersby said. ‘And in the meantime you’re most welcome to Spratt. A most excellent officer. Most excellent.’

‘I’m sure he’ll be more than useful,’ Ironside said.

‘Good, good. And if there’s anything else we can do to help, just say the word. Anything else at all.’

Both Superintendent Ironside’s grey eyebrows rose just a little.

‘That’s most kind,’ he said. ‘I think in that case I’ll avail myself of Constable Lassington as well. This way, Constable.’

6

Superintendent Ironside led Peter Lassington down the little corridor towards the room where Teddy Pariss had been killed. Outside it Detective-Constable Spratt stood on guard, grinning in half-concealed delight at his sudden loan to the Murder Squad. Behind Ironside's back Inspector Hammersby stood in silence. His face was getting slowly more and more red.

The superintendent looked round. He shivered ostentatiously in the keen wind whistling down the corridor from the pair of double doors at the end.

‘Constable,’ he said to Peter. ‘Just see to that draught, will you? There's no need for us to be uncomfortable.’

Peter grasped the iron bar running across the two doors and banged them sharply closed.

‘Ah,’ said Ironside, ‘that's much better. And now let's examine the scene of the crime.’

He looked at Jack and Peter.

‘You'll oblige me by paying close attention to such directions as I may give,’ he said.

Even Jack looked solemn, all except his dancing, irrepressible eyes.

‘Now,’ said Ironside, ‘hands in pockets if you please.’

Jack, who in any case was always ready to drop into an informal attitude, obeyed without a second thought. Peter looked puzzled but was careful not to fail to do as he was told.

A slight smile appeared at the corner of the superintendent's wide mouth.

'It simply keeps you from inadvertently touching anything before the scientific stuff begins,' he said.

Peter relaxed.

Ironside opened the office door and stepped just into the little room. The others came in at his heels. Teddy Pariss did not let their intrusion disturb him.

'Very well,' Ironside said, 'now oblige me by standing perfectly still.'

Peter glanced at Jack. He found that Jack was glancing at him. They froze where they were.

The superintendent lifted his craggy face into the air and stood apparently gazing into space. In the silence they could hear his deep, slow breathing.

After a while he turned suddenly to Jack.

'Well, Spratt, anything there?'

'Anything where, sir?'

Ironside's two grey shaggy eyebrows rose.

‘I suppose,’ he said, ‘you haven’t the least idea what I’ve been doing?’

‘Not a notion, sir,’ Jack answered.

‘Then let me advise you to remember it. Perhaps one day you’ll be conducting a murder investigation yourself. Then this small procedure may make a lot of difference.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Jack said.

His eyes gleamed with a distant vision.

‘On the other hand,’ said Ironside, ‘you may spend the rest of your service as a detective-constable. But in either case, note that the recent presence of a stranger in a confined space can often be detected by the sense of smell.’

Illumination patently dawned on Jack’s face.

Peter quietly sniffed the close air of the little office.

Ironside wheeled round to him.

‘Well?’

Peter looked embarrassed.

‘I didn’t notice anything really, sir,’ he said.

‘No? Not a lingering trace of Chanel Number Five?’

For an instant Peter took the superintendent seriously. Then he realized.

‘No, sir,’ he said. ‘Not Chanel Number Five.’

‘And what scent would you have smelt if there had been that particular perfume in the air?’

‘Don’t know, sir.’

The superintendent looked at him mildly.

‘But an investigating officer should know everything, Constable.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Peter licked his lips.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘I don’t think there is any scent in here at all.’

‘No? Well, since you wouldn’t be able to deduce anything if there were, perhaps it’s a good thing. What a snub to our good murderess if her comparatively exotic He de Bois – Chanel Number Twenty-One for your information, Constable – were confused with the mass-produced sweetness of Number Five.’

‘Murderess, sir?’ Jack said. ‘Then –’

The superintendent was smiling as if to himself. When Jack’s voice faded comically away he looked up at him.

‘Well, what is there to smell since perfume appears to be absent?’ he said.

Jack sniffed again. Loudly.

‘It smells kind of dusty,’ he said. ‘And then there’s something else pretty pongy. Can’t quite place it. Reminds me of some sort of shop.’

‘It’s the divan,’ Peter broke in. ‘I don’t know just what its smell is, but you get it in all furniture shops.’

‘Splendid,’ said the superintendent. ‘It adds up to an odd combination, the sharp tang of well-neglected dust beside the dressing in new furnishing fabric. But if the room here has been just pressed into service, it’s all perfectly accountable. You know what’s not accountable, though, don’t you?’

Peter thought very hard.

‘No, sir.’

Jack grinned.

‘I haven’t a clue,’ he said.

Ironside jerked a nod towards the big cinema-organ fire.

‘That,’ he said.

‘The fire, sir?’ said Jack.

‘Yes, Constable. The fire. All the odours in this room should be enhanced by the heat of the fire.’

‘But it isn’t on, sir, actually,’ Jack said.

‘No, Constable. I had noticed that. I’m not completely insensitive, gone in years though I am. The point of my remark was exactly that the fire is not on.’

‘Perhaps Mr Pariss didn’t want it on,’ Jack said.

The superintendent let his gaze travel slowly round. Jack’s gaze followed. Bit by bit he began to look thoroughly hangdog.

At last he could keep it back no longer.

‘You mean he’s taken such trouble to make himself comfortable he’d be bound to want the fire on,’ Jack said.

‘It’s an unpleasant day,’ said Ironside.

Peter coughed.

‘He certainly wanted the fire on when I saw him this morning, sir,’ he said.

Ironside wheeled round.

‘Ah, you saw him this morning? What time was that?’

‘I’m not certain to a minute, sir. About half past twelve, maybe a bit later.’

‘Well,’ said Ironside, ‘this is most convenient. A good, reliable witness that the victim was alive at a certain hour. Because you know what the question is that I’m asking myself at this moment?’

‘Who did it, sir,’ Peter said.

‘Oh, good gracious me, no,’ said Ironside. ‘My, how you young people do rush into things. At the present moment, I assure you, I am entirely uninterested in who did it.’

It would have been difficult to judge whether Jack or Peter looked more at a loss. Possibly they were equally so.

Ironside smiled.

‘We must first ask whether anything has been done at all, gentlemen,’ he said. ‘And then we want to know whom it was done to, and next when it was done and how it was done. When we have

dealt with all those important matters we can conveniently come to who did it, and possibly one day we may get to have an idea about why it was done. Always providing it was done at all.'

'But, sir, there's a knife sticking in his back,' Jack said with pure indignation.

'Why, so there is. Then perhaps we can make a working hypothesis that someone stuck it there.'

Jack glowered. The superintendent appeared to be majestically unconcerned.

'At least,' he said, 'that brings us to the question "Who was the victim?" There's no doubt about identity?'

'It's Mr Pariss, sir,' said Peter. 'Teddy Pariss. There really can't be any doubt. I know him well enough to identify him for whoever you like.'

'Teddy Pariss,' said the superintendent gently. 'Well, now, we've all read about Teddy Pariss in the newspapers. All those lavish gifts to charities.'

'All those pretty girl competitions, you mean,' Jack said.

'Yes,' said the superintendent, 'that is what I meant. But one mustn't forget that almost every time our friend here ran a contest to emphasize some aspect of feminine desirability one charity or another did make a considerable gain.'

'I can't see how that could get him killed,' Peter said.

‘But we’re not discussing why he was killed, Constable. We may never have to discuss that. It may become quite plain who killed him without doing anything so foolhardy as to look into a human mind.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Peter.

A little smile flickered over Ironside’s mouth.

‘Oh, I know you’d like to look into motive’s,’ he said. ‘But when you’re as near retirement as I am you’ll be glad to be able to avoid anything as devious. But, in any case, before we go to dizzy heights I’d like to know a few facts about Mr Pariss, since he’s conveniently incapable of upsetting them now.’

He turned back and, with his hands still carefully thrust into his pockets, stooped down and peered at the subject of his inquiries.

Behind his back Jack looked at Peter and made an expressive face. Sometimes a joke, of any sort, is the only way to come to terms with something or somebody of a highly enigmatic cast.

‘Yes,’ said Superintendent Ironside, still peering, ‘Teddy Pariss, what do we know about him?’

‘He owned this place for a start,’ Peter said. ‘And a string of places like it here in London and up and down the country.’

‘Ah, yes, the Star Bowl ballrooms. That’s it, isn’t it? Temples dedicated to the pure rites of feminine beauty.’

‘I’d call ‘em pretty posh-looking dance halls,’ Jack said.

Ironside spoke without looking round from the Star Bowl's late owner.

'Excellent, Spratt,' he said. 'You must bring in a dose of your sharp reality whenever you catch me being too fanciful.'

'Sorry, sir,' said Jack.

'No, no. No need for apology. Did you know I'm due to retire at the end of the week? Doubtless that will be postponed now. But it does induce reflections of a sweeping generality quite unsuitable to a policeman. So you must bring us a corrective whenever you can.'

Jack said nothing.

In a moment Ironside resumed.

'Yes, temples dedicated to the rites of feminine attractiveness. A fanciful way of looking at it. Though of course the more important it becomes to little girls to see themselves as infinitely desirable creatures, the more Mr Pariss benefits from his beauty contests.'

'Suppose so, sir,' Jack said.

Behind the superintendent's back he pointed rapidly to the side of his head with a screw of his forefinger. Peter checked a laugh.

'And Pariss has benefited more than a little,' Ironside added in the same deliberate tones. 'When I knew him thirty years ago he was only a small-time ponce.'

Jack's attention riveted back to the kneeling figure in front of them.

‘You knew him, sir?’ Peter said.

‘You’re surprised I mingled with such people? But I was quite human once. I was even a simple constable a very long time ago.’

‘And Teddy Pariss,’ Jack asked, ‘he was bent at that time, was he?’

‘Oh, yes, indeed. Quite considerably bent. The only thing is: are you right to think he’s no longer bent?’

‘We’ve got nothing on him at the station, sir. Not so far as I know.’

‘No, Spratt, I’m sure there’s nothing on him at the station. I’m sure he’s a model citizen now as far as the letter of the law goes. But I find it hard to believe that Teddy Pariss isn’t quite appreciably bent still.’

Superintendent Ironside fell silent beside the body in the sporty Prince of Wales check suit.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I think it would be fair to call him a confidence trickster. I wonder has his trickery come home to roost?’

‘You mean that he’s been killed over something to do with his beauty contest, sir?’ Peter said.

‘I detect a note of incredulity, Lassington. But remember by and large Teddy Pariss was his beauty contests. If I’m not mistaken, he spent almost all his time making sure the public knew about him and about them.’

He got to his feet with a slight grimace as an arthritic pain jabbed at the small of his back.

‘I’ve no doubt,’ he added, ‘that the new and excessively bouncy divan, smelling so much of the furniture shop, was there for an obvious purpose.’

Jack shook his head like someone caught out once again.

‘That’s true enough, sir,’ Peter said. ‘He hinted to me this morning that he often had a girl in. He even had a special notice saying “Keep Out”.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Ironside, ‘I saw it. Even your estimable Inspector Hammersby seemed to have been impressed by it.’

Ironside looked round the little dusty-smelling room.

‘Which brings us to the question “How?”’ he said.

‘The knife, sir?’ Peter said tentatively.

‘No, Lassington. I’m not suggesting that that knife did not kill the poor fellow. There are some assumptions even I am willing to make. Though the medical evidence may upset even that. But I merely asked just exactly what happened when someone poked the knife into him in that distressingly vigorous way.’

Peter looked across at the window above the big metallic fire.

‘Yes, I had noticed the window was open,’ Ironside said. ‘But as Mr Pariss had been dead for some little while I saw no reason why it

shouldn't wait. However, let us turn our attention to it now. What does it tell you, Lassington?'

Peter looked at the open window with suspicion.

'Well, sir,' he said doubtfully, 'surely it means that whoever killed Mr Pariss came in that way?'

'It's certainly no day for leaving the window wide open, even if you were not such a creature of comfort as this creature was,' Ironside said.

He glanced briefly at the mortal remains of the late Mr Pariss.

'And then there's the desk drawers, sir,' Peter went on more confidently. 'I mean, the way they're all forced open like that. It can only mean one thing.'

'Only one?'

'Well, sir, surely it must mean someone came in and raided the place.'

Ironside nodded gravely.

'Open drawers,' he said. 'Some papers on the floor there behind the desk, too. It certainly looks like breaking and entering.'

'Can it really be anything else, sir?' Jack asked, growing cunning.

'Do you think it can, Spratt?'

'Well, I don't, sir, and that's a fact.'

'Then you'd better have a closer look at that window. You know the sort of thing to keep an eye out for, I dare say.'

‘I think so, sir. Signs of forcing, any clues to the type of instrument used, footmarks on the wall below, and keep well clear until the boys have checked for dabs.’

‘I see all those lectures at the training school left their mark.’

Jack did not reply. Instead he went and began examining the window. Ironside stood looking down in a melancholy way at the rifled drawers of the little desk.

‘Tell me, Spratt,’ he said after a few moments, ‘how high up in the outside wall is that window?’

‘About five feet to the sill, sir,’ Jack said.

‘It must be the same as the ones next door,’ said Peter. ‘I looked out of them when I was checking to see if the safe in there was being done.’

‘Yup,’ said Jack. ‘This window comes right next to one of those.’

He drew his head back in.

‘Looks as if the catch was pushed back, sir,’ he said. ‘The gap between the two frames is quite wide enough.’

‘Any physical clues on the catch itself?’ Ironside asked. ‘You’ll find a magnifying glass in the murder bag if you want it.’

Jack hurried over, unable to resist the chance of opening the fabled bag.

‘Now what about this other window over here?’ Superintendent Ironside said.

Peter looked up at the other window in the room. He had hardly noticed it before. It was high up in the corner and only about a foot square.

‘Doesn’t look as if anyone could have got in there, sir,’ he said.

‘No?’ Ironside said.

‘They could do, sir,’ said Jack. ‘If your head with one arm beside it will go through, the rest of you will.’

He stood for an instant with his right arm held up alongside his right cheek.

‘Very good,’ Ironside said. ‘All those lectures, and not one of them going to waste.’

He strolled over and looked up at the little window.

Peter glared at Jack. Jack grinned widely.

‘What’s on the other side of this, then?’ Ironside asked.

‘Think there’s a yard of sorts outside there, sir,’ said Peter.

‘Shall we go and look?’ Ironside said. ‘If we were certain it would greatly relieve my mind.’

Peter followed him out of the little office and through the double doors just beside it. As he had thought, there was a yard on the far side of the little window. And the window itself was covered with a matted layer of spiders’ webs.

‘Well, that’s out,’ he said.

Ironside glanced round the long, narrow yard bordered on one side by a tall wall topped by a vicious growth of jagged-edged bottles and on the other side by the towering blank side of the Star Bowl itself. At ground level there were a few windows, their grey dirtiness streaked here and there where the raindrops had dribbled down them.

The superintendent indicated them with a long, disdainful forefinger.

‘What rooms do they belong to?’ he asked.

Peter grimaced in concentration as he worked it out. In a moment he came up with the answer.

‘The first pair are the dressing-rooms,’ he said. ‘Those are the ones you can just make out a bit of lace curtaining across. And next is the rest room. That sort of glint is the copper of the tea-urn, I think. And the other one, the one with lined glass, is the toilet.’

‘Excellent,’ said Ironside.

But he spoke so quietly and the continuous spatter of the rain was so noisy that it was doubtful if Peter could have heard.

For a few moments more the superintendent continued to contemplate the uninspiring sight of the yard. The rain with judicial impartiality battered steadily down on the two dented oil drums, the ladder with half its rungs missing, the rejected hardboard cutout of a girl with no clothes on, the pile of aged pieces of useful wood, the

rusty tap on the end of the rusty standpipe and the skeleton of a once proud bicycle.

Near the little window of Teddy Pariss's office where the yard extended by a few feet into the neighbouring alley a rough lean-to shed had been constructed out of some sheets of rust-streaked corrugated iron. The superintendent squelched across, pushed open the door, which squeaked abominably, and put his head inside.

He made no comment on what, if anything, he saw there but at last turned and left the rain to get on with it.

Gratefully Peter banged the double doors closed behind them. Ironside shook the wet off.

'It's chilling, isn't it, lad?' he said. 'Hardly conducive to the sort of activities our deceased friend spent his life promoting.'

Peter laughed.

'I certainly wouldn't like to be a bathing beauty out in that lot,' he said.

'No,' said Ironside, 'there ought to be a law against it.'

He strode into the little office again and prowled silently round the square of deep red carpet. Jack and Peter watched, expecting a revelation.

But they were disappointed. With a clatter of feet and a good deal of noisy joking the fingerprint men, the photographer, the police surgeon and the stretcher bearers descended to fulfil their various avocations.

‘Gentlemen,’ Ironside said, ‘I think our usefulness here has ended. The scientific forces will now discover exactly what happened.’

The police surgeon, who had worked on cases with Superintendent Ironside before, laughed loudly.

‘I shall be in the room next door if anyone wants me,’ Ironside said.

He led his two assistants out into the corridor, along to the corner and into the manager’s office. Its ranged pink blotters still awaited the considered doodlings of the judges of the great Miss Valentine contest. Its black japanned safe was still peacefully intact.

‘Well, now,’ Ironside said, ‘we’ve established where this terrible crime took place. No doubt in a few moments my friend, Doctor Arthur, will be able to tell me that it was indeed the knife with the charming and tasteful handle which killed the poor man. But I think before he instructs us as to when the crime took place we ought to have some facts of our own.’

‘If we want to get a line on the time,’ Peter said, ‘Bert Mullens, the stage-door keeper, is the bloke to ask. He’s been stuck in that box of his along the corridor all day. He ought to know what’s been happening.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Ironside. ‘He ought to know if anyone does. Suppose you call him in, Constable.’

Peter went to the door. He looked along the broad corridor and beckoned to Bert, who had been regarding the manager’s office with

mournful distrust ever since Ironside had gone into it. He came at once with shambling eagerness.

The superintendent made a great deal of fuss sitting him down on one of the leather-covered upright chairs ranged all along the big table and making sure he was comfortable.

‘Well, now,’ he said at last, ‘I’ve asked you to help us, Mr Mullens, because you’re the one man who really knows what goes on round here.’

He leant forward across the shiny surface of the table.

‘You know, Mr Mullens,’ he said, ‘it’s the man who knows who really counts in this world. He may not be the one who shouts out the orders but he’s the one who counts.’

Slowly Bert’s tight mouth drooped open. The superintendent stayed leaning across the table crooning away to him about the delights of knowing everybody else’s business and the difficulties of a stage-door keeper’s lot. Every now and again he asked a question – what hours Bert worked, where exactly the gas-ring in his box was, just how well the clock kept time.

And each question received a more garrulous answer.

Standing in the background Peter caught Jack’s eye. As one they yawned.

‘So I suppose you would have known pretty well if anybody went down the little corridor to Mr Pariss’s room?’ Ironside said.

Bert’s wide open mouth shut.

‘Pretty well,’ he said scornfully. ‘Let me tell you, I’d of known for sure. No one could have got along there without me seeing them.’

Superintendent Ironside suddenly sat back.

‘You’re very certain,’ he said.

‘Course I’m certain. I tell you it was more than my job was worth to let anyone in what hadn’t got permission. And you should see the lot that tried it – newspaper writers, lads out for a giggle, film men, advertising men, photographers, even old Bill Sprogson what keeps a dirty bookshop down the street. I tell you, I have to keep my eyes open.’

The superintendent leant forward again.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘it’s a piece of luck for us that you do, Mr Mullens. You see, what we want to get at, as closely as we can, is when this attack was carried out. Now, if we know when you saw Mr Pariss last and when others saw him, we shall be half-way there.’

‘I never saw him at all,’ Bert said. ‘Not after he went into his office when Mr Lassington was there.’

‘No? Well, never mind. That tells us one thing, doesn’t it? That he stayed in the office all the time. Isn’t that so?’

‘He went in there when Constable Lassington was there,’ Bert said dogmatically, ‘and he never come out after that.’

‘Good,’ said the superintendent, ‘that’s a start. Now, did anyone go along to see him after the constable here left?’

Now Peter and Jack were no longer yawning.

‘Yes, they did,’ Bert said. ‘That June Curtis saw him.’

Jack glanced sharply at Peter. Peter was absorbed in watching the interrogation.

‘June Curtis?’ Ironside asked. ‘Who’s she?’

‘She’s one of the beauties,’ Bert answered. ‘Thirty-seven, twenty-four, thirty-six, she is.’

Under the shaggy grey eyebrows Superintendent Ironside’s eyes blinked. But he refrained from any other comment.

‘Saw her coming out of his office just on twenty-five past one,’ Bert went on. ‘What she was in there for’s her own affair.’

Jack took an impulsive step forward.

‘How long was she in there?’ he snapped out.

Ironside turned and looked at him.

‘No doubt Mr Mullens will tell us that in his own time,’ he said.

Slowly Jack grinned.

‘Sorry, sir,’ he said. ‘The truth of the matter is I know June Curtis.’

‘Then you must make a really extraordinary effort to contain yourself, Constable,’ Ironside said.

He looked round at Peter who had come up on the other side of him and was looking at Bert Mullens nearly as intently as Jack.

‘Constable Lassington,’ he said, ‘do you know this lady, too?’

‘No, sir,’ Peter answered. ‘I know of her, but I’ve never actually met her. But –’

‘But what, Constable?’

Peter swallowed.

‘But I am a bit surprised to hear she went along to see Teddy Pariss, sir.’

Behind Ironside’s back Jack winked at him gratefully.

‘Surprised?’ Bert Mullens broke in. ‘Mr Pariss was one of the judges tonight, wasn’t he? It don’t surprise me she went along to see him.’

‘This is a custom, is it?’ Ironside said. ‘It’s often done, this canvassing of the judges at contests of this sort?’

Bert Mullens looked at him like a fish out of water.

The superintendent leant forward.

‘What I mean is,’ he said, ‘do the girls often visit the judges in their private offices?’

Bert looked suspicious.

‘I don’t know about that,’ he said. ‘But I do know Mr Pariss weren’t averse to having a pretty girl in with him.’

‘I see. And this particular pretty girl came out at what time did you say?’

‘Twenty-five after one. I happened to look at my clock.’

‘Ah, yes. The clock that you take such pains to put right every morning.’

‘It’s because of the staff, like I said,’ Bert explained.

The clock seemed to have a deeply symbolic meaning for him. Once mentioned, however casually, he felt a painfully obvious need to talk about it. About its rightness to a second, about its useful properties as a check on the slackness of ‘the staff’.

It was some time before the superintendent began gently leading him back to the facts of the case. But at last he put a directly relevant question.

‘So Miss Curtis was the only one who saw Mr Pariss between the time Constable Lassington left him and the time you found him dead?’ he asked.

‘Oh, no,’ said Bert Mullens.

‘No?’

‘No, he had his secretary in there too. I heard him talking to her. Just a moment and I shall be able to think of the time.’

They waited as Bert’s bleary eyes roved round about in search of the exact elusive minute.

‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘I’ll be honest with you.’

‘Always the best policy,’ Ironside murmured comfortingly.

‘Yes, honest. I can’t say what time. Not really.’

Ironside leant another inch farther forward.

‘But you can make a guess? A reasonable guess?’

‘Oh, yes. It must of been about quarter past. But give it to you to the minute I could not.’

‘Quarter past one?’ Ironside said. ‘Well, that hardly allows Miss Curtis much time for – er – a really thorough interview.’

He turned quickly and looked up at Jack in time to catch an expression of unmistakable relief on his face.

He turned back to Bert Mullens.

‘You did say it was at twenty-five past you saw Miss Curtis coming out of the office?’ he asked.

Peter looked hard at the droopy face of the stage-door keeper as he replied.

‘Twenty-five past as she closed that door,’ he said.

‘You saw her close the door?’ Ironside said with sudden sharpness. ‘What were you doing there? From your box you can’t see the door.’

Bert’s fishy eyes blinked in shock.

Superintendent Ironside stood up abruptly, pushing back the leather-seated chair. He looked down at the gaping face of the stage-door keeper.

‘Come,’ he said, ‘I asked you a perfectly simple question. If you saw June Curtis coming out of Teddy Pariss’s office at one twenty-five this afternoon, what were you doing there yourself? Why weren’t you in your box where you were meant to be?’

But this sudden change of tactics, the unexpected transformation from friendly, crooning cajoler into implacable martinet, was altogether too much for the delicate susceptibilities of Mr Mullens.

‘You can’t pin nothing on me,’ he said. ‘Teddy Pariss is finished now, gone and done for. He won’t sack me no more. If I want I can walk out now. Right away. I can get jobs enough if I want to now.’

‘Oh, yes, my dear, good chap,’ Ironside said. ‘There can be no possible doubt about you being able to do exactly what you want. I never for a moment questioned it. It was just that I have to be sure of the exact time you saw June Curtis. We must, if possible, find out when Mr Pariss was killed, you know. That’s vital. And that’s where you can help us.’

They were back at the beginning again. Ironside seemed quite happy about it. Step by step he went over the dull, familiar ground. They had a long, happy session about the clock again. Everything

that Bert Mullens had said was said once more. And at last they got back, with the utmost discretion, to the question of why the glass-walled box at the stage door had been left vacant for as much as two seconds.

And the answer when it came was perfectly simple.

Bert Mullens had been on his way to take a kettle out to the tap in the yard.

‘It wouldn’t of taken no more than a minute,’ he said. ‘But I have to boil up the old kettle otherwise the girls wouldn’t get no tea. They have it from an urn in the rest room. Half past one I was to make it for. And I was a bit late because of all that rumpus about Lindylou Twelvetrees locking herself in here, the silly little bitch.’

He breathed heavily.

‘And they never got no tea in the end neither,’ he added. ‘I was just going to take the kettle off the gas when in he comes bursting with all that about the safe.’

Bert looked over at Peter Lassington with dull malevolence.

‘And what time was that?’ Ironside asked conversationally.

‘It’d be just gone half past by then,’ Bert replied. ‘Say three minutes after the half hour.’

‘Now from what I was told over the telephone,’ Ironside said, ‘the warning call came to you, Lassington, at exactly half past. How long did it take you to get round here?’

‘It must have been less than a minute before I left the flat,’ Peter answered. ‘And then it would take only two minutes or so to get round here if you were running.’

‘Which brings us to one thirty-three,’ said Ironside. ‘How pleasant to find everything fitting in so well.’

He stood up.

‘Thank you, Mr Mullens,’ he said. ‘You’ve been more than helpful. We’ll possibly want a formal statement from you later, but you needn’t worry about that.’

Bert Mullens left them with the brave look of a man who could make a formal statement whenever you asked without so much as a wince.

‘Well, now,’ the superintendent said, ‘our friend with the thermometer and all that knowledge about rigor mortis still appears to be keeping his findings to himself. So I think we might try to see the two others who can cast their floods of light on this affair.’

‘June’ll be out on the stage rehearsing, sir,’ Jack said. ‘Do you want me to fetch her?’

‘You feel inclined to interrogate her just now, do you?’ Ironside said.

He shook his head.

‘I think we’ll let things out there take their course,’ he went on. ‘There’ll be terrible confusion once the sad news gets out. And

besides I rather like the idea of all that earnest parading when all the while the only begetter is lying quite, quite dead.'

He looked from Jack to Peter, from Peter to Jack. Both had by now developed the technique of keeping totally expressionless in face of such pronouncements.

'So I think Pariss's secretary, if you please, Lassington.'

'Very good, sir.'

Leaving Ironside inquiring with immense gravity about the details of Jack's career in the police, Peter went quickly along the broad corridor to the little passage leading up beside the stage. He slipped through the small door at the end and out into the ballroom.

The beaky-nosed, mottle-faced Mr Brown was still tirelessly rehearsing the beauties, who by now all looked chilled to the bone in their scanty swim-suits.

'Right,' Mr Brown shouted, his open check waistcoat flapping angrily, 'we'll do it again. And again. And again. Till we get it right. Okay, Charlie.'

The worried piano-player, who so surprisingly attended Civil Defence lectures, brought his hands banging down on the chipped keys of his instrument once more. The familiar briskly seductive tune to which the girls paraded floated out again.

Peter looked round. There were fewer people about now. The only one who could possibly be Teddy Pariss's secretary was a little, quite elderly woman sitting near, but not with, the judges. There

was more than a little pointedness in the way she dissociated herself from the beauty queens' sponsors hovering anxiously around.

'Now look at it this way,' a chubby young man with rimless spectacles was saying to one of the judges as Peter went by, 'look at it our way. That girl, Nine, has cost us a lot of money. Well, naturally, we want to see a return for that investment. Now, how about discussing the whole thing over dinner before the show?'

Peter never learnt whether the judge succumbed to the bait because at that moment the little sharp-eyed woman rose with a jerk to her feet and came up to him.

'Yes?' she said. 'Can I help you?'

The phrase was formal.

'Perhaps you can,' Peter answered nevertheless. 'I'm looking for Mr Pariss's secretary.'

An instant comprehension came into her eyes.

'You're the police,' she said in a very quiet voice.

Peter had hoped that in his smart civvies he did not look quite so much a constable. He was also a little surprised that this neat little spare-fleshed woman seemed to know why there should be policemen about. But a moment's look at those keen eyes told him that what Mr Brown knew she would know too. Within about five seconds.

'I'm from Superintendent Ironside,' he said to her. 'He asked if you'd have a word with him. You are Mr Pariss's secretary?'

‘I was.’

Her flint eyes did not flicker behind the bright spectacles.

‘Then you know what it is he wants,’ Peter said.

‘Certainly. Mr Brown told me. He needed moral support.’

The exuberant Teddy Pariss’s unexuberant secretary followed Peter primly back to the manager’s office where the superintendent waited.

‘I don’t think I know your name,’ Ironside began with proper formality.

‘Stitchford, Miss Daisy Stitchford.’

‘Won’t you sit down, Miss Stitchford?’

She sat on the chair Bert Mullens had occupied. But pulled it into the table, squarely and neatly.

‘You’ve been Mr Pariss’s secretary a long time?’ Ironside began unexpectedly.

‘Yes,’ she answered.

‘So you would know a good deal about his business?’

‘I know what a secretary knows.’

Ironside smiled.

‘Then you know everything.’

‘But I certainly won’t tell everything.’

There was a healthy sharpness in her tone like unsugared rhubarb.

Ironside's eyebrows shot up.

'But, my dear Miss Stitchford, who ever suggested that you should?'

'Just because Mr Pariss is dead,' Daisy Stitchford said, 'it doesn't mean that everything he ever did can be poked and pried into just like that. He had associates. There is a lot of money involved in the business.'

'Ah, associates.'

'Business associates. Merchant banks who financed him.'

'And a merchant bank would hardly undertake to eliminate an unsatisfactory partner in quite the way Mr Pariss was eliminated. No, I understand that.'

'But a merchant bank is hardly going to be pleased to lose the very considerable sum invested in the Miss Valentine enterprise,' Daisy Stitchford said.

Ironside looked surprised. Only a little surprised. But then he was a man who was not surprised easily.

'So even when it comes out about Mr Pariss's unfortunate end the show will go on?' he said.

'Exactly.'

Miss Stitchford's lips closed on the word like a trap.

‘Yes,’ said Ironside reflectively, ‘to tell you the truth, I wondered why some excuse hadn’t been found to bring the whole business to a standstill. But it was convenient not to have the news spread too quickly.’

Daisy Stitchford made no comment.

For a time which grew into minutes Superintendent Ironside let her sit in silence.

‘You aren’t interested in why it’s convenient not to have the news spread too quickly?’ he asked at last. ‘You’ve no observations to make?’

‘No. It’s your affair. I don’t see why I should have anything to say about it in particular.’

‘So you’re keeping silent?’

‘Certainly.’

‘No doubt it’s a habit of yours, not to say anything unless you’ve something to say?’

‘I’ve found it pays.’

‘You’ve learnt from experience?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you weren’t always so uncommunicative?’

Daisy Stitchford looked at him through her bright spectacle lenses.

‘I can’t see that this has anything to do with the matter in hand,’ she said.

‘No?’

‘No.’

‘It doesn’t occur to you that we may have to inquire quite deeply into Mr Pariss’s past? People aren’t very often killed for no reason at all. They turn out to have enemies. The enemies have been produced by something in the past. You’ve worked for Mr Pariss for a long time. Your past and his go together.’

‘No.’

‘My dear Miss Stitchford, it’s your duty, you know. It’s everyone’s duty to help the police.’

The answer came snapping back.

‘And I shall do what most people do, help them as much as it suits me.’

‘Yes, I was afraid you’d say that. It’s deplorably true. But I must warn you that what you are contemplating is very wrong. No doubt you think you can save yourself some unpleasantness by not cooperating. But I assure you you’re not right.’

‘I think I am.’

Ironside smiled a little.

‘Oh, don’t mistake me,’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean you would save yourself unpleasantness by cooperating with the police. I simply

meant that there's unpleasantness both ways so that you might as well help. This is the real world, you know.'

Daisy Stitchford smiled a little, oblique, mirthless smile.

'But nevertheless,' she said, 'I prefer to keep my own counsel.'

Ironside leant towards her.

'I give you solemn warning,' he said. 'It's your duty to assist the police. If you don't do so, it may be very serious for you.'

Daisy Stitchford stood up.

'That is all you have to say?' she asked.

'Oh, good gracious me, no,' said Ironside. 'We asked you to come in here, you know, so that we could pin down as accurately as we could the time that this abominable attack on your late employer took place.'

'If I can help with that, I will,' said Miss Stitchford.

She sat down again. Thin, desiccated legs in grim lisle stockings neatly placed together.

'Well, now,' said the superintendent, 'you were with Mr Pariss during the late morning, were you not?'

'The late morning? What time do you mean by that?'

The superintendent pursed his lips in consideration.

'Well, shall we say somewhere after one o'clock? I think that's a fair description of late morning. You were with Mr Pariss round about then?'

Daisy Stitchford looked suddenly and genuinely surprised.
Flabbergasted.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I most certainly was not.’

8

Daisy Stitchford looked at the three policemen opposite her across the glossy table and ranged pink blotters over which the coveted title of Miss Valentine was eventually to be decided. She looked as if she had suddenly found herself as unclothed as the beauties rehearsing even at that moment for the contest to be held that evening, the feast of Saint Valentine.

And the three policemen looked put out in varying degrees themselves. Detective-Constable Spratt gaped. Constable Lassington's deceptively pink and white face wore an expression of almost total bewilderment. Even Superintendent Ironside appeared not altogether to have expected Daisy's sudden and vehement denial that she had been with her late employer, the resourceful Teddy Pariss, within the hour of his demise.

'No,' Daisy said once more, 'I was not with Mr Pariss round about one o'clock. Whatever made you think I was?'

Ironside smiled with faint ruefulness.

'You've no idea how confusing an affair of this sort is,' he said.

Daisy glanced at him sharply through her bright spectacles.

'Did nobody tell you that Mr Pariss had hung up his "Keep Out" notice?' she said.

‘Yes,’ said Ironside gravely, ‘we had learnt about that. But I wasn’t sure that it would apply to someone like you.’

Daisy tossed her sparsely arranged hair.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘you don’t think I participated in what went on when that notice was up, I should hope.’

‘Perhaps I could answer that more easily if I knew what did go on,’ Ironside suggested.

‘You haven’t learnt much, have you?’

‘We’re slow, dreadfully slow.’

‘Then I’d better enlighten you as quickly as may be. When that notice was hung on Mr Pariss’s door as often as not he had a girl in there. That’s the whole truth and the simple truth.’

Ironside smiled a little.

‘The simple truth,’ he said. ‘Well, it’s certainly simple. Even a policeman can understand that sort of thing. And as long as it’s the whole truth too, then we can begin to know where we stand.’

‘You can take it from me that it’s so,’ Daisy answered.

She seemed a little less aggressive and Ironside looked happier.

‘I’ve been Teddy Pariss’s secretary for more than thirty years, and I know what goes on,’ Daisy continued.

‘Yes,’ said Ironside, ‘but you’re reluctant to tell us, on the whole.’

‘There are things which I can see you have a right to know, and there are things which are no concern of yours.’

‘Yes, so you said. And I suppose there are some things which you’d be quite glad to tell us anyhow?’

Daisy’s bloodless lips closed tightly together.

Ironside leant towards her again.

‘When was it that you did see Mr Pariss for the last time then?’ he asked.

‘I saw him when he left the ballroom at about a quarter to one,’ Daisy replied primly.

‘I see. And when were you last in his office along the corridor there?’

‘I was in there first thing in the morning,’ Daisy answered. ‘I brought the mail along from the main offices and left it for his attention if he got round to it. There’s always so much to do when there’s a big contest on.’

‘Mr Pariss took a personal interest in the actual show then?’

‘He certainly did. Everything had to stop for that.’

The note of disapproval dropped like acid on to the carpet.

‘I see,’ Ironside said ruminatively. ‘And that was the only time you were in the office here all morning?’

‘No, I went in once more.’

‘Oh, yes?’

‘A letter was delivered here for Mr Pariss. I took it and put it on top of the others, the ones I’d opened for him.’

‘A letter delivered here? Who was it from then?’

‘I don’t know who it was from. It was marked “Private” and naturally I made no attempt to open it.’

‘Naturally.’

‘I simply took it from the doorman, and, as I could see there was no point in disturbing Mr Pariss just at that moment – he was telling off one of the girls – I simply took the letter and put it on his desk.’

‘Unopened?’

‘I said unopened.’

‘I’m sorry, so you did. It’s just that I didn’t see an unopened letter anywhere in the office just now. I wondered what had become of it.’

‘I can’t help you there.’

‘No, of course not. I dare say it’ll turn up. And thank you for all the help you’ve given us.’

The superintendent rose courteously from his shiny leather chair.

Daisy stood up to face him.

‘I’ve given you what help I consider you’re entitled to,’ she said.

She marched out.

When the door had closed behind her Superintendent Ironside looked at his two temporary assistants. They seemed to think some sort of comment was expected.

‘Well,’ Jack said, ‘either Daisy Stitchford or Bert Mullens must be lying, that’s certain.’

Ironside smiled.

‘Oh, my good fellow. Lying? Certain? Well, which of them do you think it was?’

‘Mullens, I’d say,’ Jack answered doubtfully. ‘I mean, he’s the one who looks more like a liar.’

‘Yes,’ said Ironside with unexpected reasonableness. ‘I’d agree to that. Bert Mullens looks like a liar. And quite often when somebody looks like a liar, oddly enough they are one.’

He turned towards Peter.

Peter licked at his upper lip.

‘One thing I can clear up, sir,’ he said. ‘That letter she mentioned. It was there all right. I saw it myself when I was in with Mr Pariss. Only he’d opened it.’

‘Confirmatory evidence on behalf of Miss Stitchford,’ Ironside said. ‘It looks as though you chose the right horse, Spratt.’

‘Yes, sir. But why should Mullens lie about hearing her in the office there? He was definite enough about it’

‘Yes,’ Ironside said, ‘I did at least make sure of that. I may be thinking half the time about that country cottage I’ve bought, but I do remember essentials.’

‘But why did Mullens lie then?’ Peter said.

‘We have no proof that he did, Constable,’ said Ironside.

‘But I thought you agreed that Miss Stitchford wasn’t likely to be lying. And she said she was just in the ballroom.’

‘She said that.’

The two constables looked at each other. Peter spoke first.

‘You mean she may have counted on us not checking up on her, sir?’

‘Have you checked, Constable?’

‘Well, no, sir. Shall I? Now, sir?’

‘Yes,’ said Superintendent Ironside with immense gentleness.

Peter left the judges’ room, walked along the broad passage behind the stage till he got to the little corridor running up to the door leading to the ballroom. As he stepped through the full blare of the rehearsal met his ears again.

For the umpteenth time the tired old piano was nobly giving forth the tired old marching song of the unjudged beauties. For the umpteenth time the high-complexioned, check-waistcoated Mr Brown was shouting ‘Smile, dear, smile.’ For the umpteenth time the fat little frowsty man with the stop-watch clicked it and waited with pencil poised to record its verdict. At the judges’ table the huddled arbiters had sunk into deep apathy. The sponsors of girls fortunate enough to have them had given up urging their attributes and had retired to the pubs.

On the catwalk the last of the girls teetered on high white heels along the path of doom and regained the safety of the shallow stage. She evidently felt that this particular trial flight had been conspicuously successful. She looked round about with a confident smile.

Quietly the girl who had completed the circuit before her lifted up the spiky heel of her white shoe, swung round until it was poised over her more successful rival's white toe, and brought the sharp steel spike down.

Hard.

There was an agonized yelp which momentarily attracted the attention even of the tired piano-player.

'You bitch. You done it on purpose. When ever am I going to get another pair?' shouted the attacked girl, a blonde with a slight tendency to rabbit teeth.

The aggressor, a languid brunette secretly very worried about her complexion, looked at her contemptuously.

'That the only pair you got with you, is it?' she asked.

'Course it is. They cost money white shoes like this do.'

'Well, if you're not going to lay out a bit you can't expect to get nowhere, can you? I thought everybody had sense enough not to wear their finals shoes for rehearsals. Stands to reason.'

The languid brunette turned haughtily away.

The blonde's eyes, under her thick-rimmed eyelashes, burnt with rage. She lifted her right leg and in a flash brought her own sharp stiletto heel down in the direction of the brunette's left leg.

The leg was long and exactly the right shape, the shape the legs of the models in the magazines are. The brunette counted on her legs to do great things for her before the day was over.

The blonde's heel caught her calf at just the highest point of its gently swelling roundness. It missed hitting fair and square but did leave a satisfactory long graze running down towards the instep. There was no bleeding but within seconds quite an ugly blue-black mark appeared.

Tears spilling over her eyes, the brunette turned.

'I'll teach you to do that,' she screamed.

The blonde had had the foresight to retreat with great speed the moment she had struck her blow. But the steps at the edge of the stage proved too difficult to negotiate with her face kept towards the enemy. She faltered and the brunette was upon her.

'Stop.'

The mottled-faced Mr Brown flung himself forward.

Just as the brunette's claws were raised to strike he hurled himself into the gap.

'Stop. Stop it,' he yelled.

The two girls manoeuvred to get round him.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘you’ve asked for it, you dirty little tykes. You’re out. You’re disqualified. Leave the stage.’

Instantly the two embattled viragoes were transformed into scolded children.

‘It was her fault,’ said the brunette.

‘She started it,’ said the blonde.

‘Look, give us another chance,’ the brunette said.

‘Out. Out. I said out.’

But for all the passion Mr Brown succeeded in putting into the words neither of the two girls budged.

What Mr Brown would have done was destined never to be written in the book of fate.

From down below a plaintive voice called up.

‘Hey, am I going to get shots of this lot today or not?’

It was a duly authorized Press photographer.

The effect of his intervention was dramatic. All along the huddled line of beauties backs were straightened, smiles were fixed with a quick lick of the lips for instant kissability and a general breathed prayer of ‘Cheese’, guaranteed to set any and every mouth at its peak of seductiveness.

‘Oh, all right, all right,’ said Mr Brown. ‘But for goodness’ sake be quick about it.’

The photographer, a burly young man with a harsh Scots accent and a hairy tweed jacket, began busily clicking off shots and encouraging the girls to greater and greater efforts with simple badinage.

Peter saw that his opportunity to check on Daisy Stitchford had come. He went up to Mr Brown.

‘Could I have a word with you? From Mr Ironside.’

Mr Brown darted a glance to the right and a glance to the left.

‘What is it?’

‘Quite a simple thing. We’re trying to fix the time the attack took place. Miss Stitchford’s been able to help us to some extent but we’d like to make certain of the times she gave us. Did you happen to notice her here this morning?’

‘Notice her?’ said Mr Brown. ‘Listen, would you notice a ruddy cobra if it was sitting up there fixing you with its beady eye?’

‘Cobra, eh?’

‘You can say that again.’

‘Then tell me something. What time did she go from here round to Mr Pariss’s office?’

‘Go from here? Are you mad? She nipped out early on when someone brought her a letter or something, but she didn’t leave after that.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘No, I’m a liar. She did leave. Once. For a couple of minutes just after quarter past one, it’d be. She may not look it, but she’s human too.’

‘She’d have gone to the toilet near the dressing-room?’ Peter asked.

‘I didn’t follow her,’ Mr Brown said. ‘I’m not that curious.’

‘All right. But did she go out again?’

‘When she might have spotted one of us doing something Teddy Pariss wouldn’t like? Listen, mate, that bloody scorpion wouldn’t pass up a chance like that, not if the place was full of ruddy savages howling for her blood.’

‘What’s this about a scorpion?’

It was the piano-player. The amateur of Civil Defence.

Mr Brown turned to him.

‘I was just telling this chap about our lady friend,’ he said.

‘The honourable Daisy?’

‘The honourable D. He wanted to know if she left us on our own when Teddy turned it in just before dinner-time.’

‘Her? Leave us on our tod? Don’t be silly, mate.’

Peter decided to ignore the note of irreverence. It was apparent that Daisy had been speaking the perfect truth when Ironside had questioned her.

A phenomenon so rare that it deserves some mark of respect.

Peter walked quietly away.

Back behind the stage he found that Superintendent Ironside and Jack had moved back into the little office where Teddy Pariss had met his sad end.

‘Well,’ said the superintendent when Peter presented himself, ‘you’ll be pleased to hear that the doctor felt he couldn’t give us any more information about the body than that it had been killed between half past twelve and half past one. I trust you’ll be a little more precise, if not so scientific.’

Peter told him what he had learnt.

‘Well, then,’ Jack burst out, ‘what did Bert Mullens want to go saying he’d heard her in here for?’

Ironside turned to him with a smile beginning to play round his lips.

‘He didn’t say that, Constable.’

‘But—’

‘What he actually said was that he had heard Pariss talking to her. It’s quite important, you know, to listen to what people say.’

‘Well, all the same,’ Jack said, with muffled aggressiveness, ‘it isn’t much different.’

‘No? It seems to me it’s quite possible for our intelligent Mr Mullens to have heard his late employer talking to someone and to

have assumed from the conversation that Miss Stitchford was the silent hearer.'

'But still, sir,' Peter said, 'it doesn't make a great deal of difference, does it? I mean, we do know that Pariss was talking to someone at quarter past one, so everything was normal then. And even after that June Curtis saw him.'

'Excellently put, Constable,' said the superintendent. 'A really logical exposition. And one which serves to highlight the importance of an immediate interview with Miss Curtis.'

Suddenly he swung on his heel away from Peter and stood looking thoughtfully at Jack.

'Look, sir, I do know the girl,' Jack broke out at last. 'Do you want me to report back to the station?'

'Ah, no,' said Ironside, 'I think that would be a little extreme. We must do our best in other ways to avoid embarrassment.'

'Yes, sir,' said Jack.

He looked at Ironside from under lowered eyes.

'But I think the time has come,' the superintendent went on in the same leisurely manner, 'to abandon this business of keeping quiet about the sad event we're investigating.'

He sat on the corner of the late Teddy's little temporary desk and smiled.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘I find the notion of those girls parading about vaunting their charms is beginning to be rather depressing after all. I think we’ll make our announcement and pack them off until this evening. There are times, even in this day and age, when commercial considerations must take second place.’

He stood up more briskly.

‘Spratt,’ he said, ‘I’ll get you to fetch your Miss Curtis while Lassington and I continue to look for that missing letter. To tell you the truth, I find it rather intriguing.’

‘But, look, sir,’ said Peter, with measurable temerity, ‘it isn’t so important any more to check up on what Miss Stitchford told us. After all, when we checked the times we found she was quite right, and in any case we know the killer couldn’t have got in till after June Curtis had left.’

‘Oh,’ Ironside said, ‘more cogent reasoning. Really, Constable, you’ll have to ration yourself. Especially as flaws are liable to creep in.’

Jack grinned. Peter frowned.

‘Flaws, sir?’ he said.

‘Yes, Constable. Such as assuming that whoever killed Pariss broke in to do it. Because, you know, they did no such thing. Not for one moment.’

Peter Lassington looked round the little office where the window was still as punctiliously open as it had been when he had burst in and discovered the body of Teddy Pariss, old Toad-eyes himself. The photographer and the fingerprint team had been careful, too, not to disturb the litter of rifled papers that lay across the red square of carpet and the plundered drawers of the little desk were meticulously open to the exact extent they had been before.

Only Teddy Pariss had left. In a horizontal pose. To be replaced by a soft chalk outline on the thick pile of the carpet.

‘But listen, sir,’ Peter said to the enigmatically smiling Superintendent Ironside, ‘someone certainly broke in here, and they must have been the one who killed Pariss.’

‘The window showed every sign of being forced when I looked at it, sir,’ Jack added.

‘Dear me, did it, indeed? And yet, you know, gentlemen, I find it hard som how to picture the scene. The late Mr Pariss sitting absorbed in the task of emphasizing the sexual aspects of the modern female, shivering a little because he has oddly omitted to switch on his great, big electric fire, and behind him a dark figure scrabbles at the window, forces back the catch with a satisfying click, pushes up the lower frame, clambers in, borrows a paper-knife and prods it into that expensive-looking suiting.’

Jack looked shame-faced. Peter looked very shame-faced.

‘You’re quite right, sir,’ Jack admitted with a rueful grin, ‘it couldn’t possibly have happened like that. Does this mean the break-in was a fake?’

‘Not at all,’ Ironside said in his irritatingly quiet way.

‘How’s that, sir?’ Peter asked with caution.

Ironside looked at him.

‘I thought you were the great logician,’ he said.

‘It’s not working any more, I’m afraid, sir.’

‘It’s perfectly simple, Constable. Someone may have broken in after Pariss was dead. You know, you’re trying to prepare a case that even an ingenious legal gentleman can’t pick holes in. Don’t forget that. That’s our job.’

He glanced round the room.

‘Thank goodness it’s the last time I shall have such a task,’ he said. ‘This time next week I shall be setting up some rabbit cages at a nice little cottage down in Essex. Always provided, that is, that this case is not in the same state of mystery then as it is now.’

‘So I’ll go and tell them out there about Pariss, and then fetch Miss Curtis, sir?’ Jack asked.

‘Yes, do that. Fetch – er – Miss Curtis, if that’s what you call her. And Lassington will help me have another look for that letter. It’s something I’d really like to see.’

Jack went and the superintendent began a slow, methodical search of the square, dusty-floored little office.

‘You say you saw the letter?’ he asked Peter.

‘Yes, sir. I think so, sir.’

Peter sounded a little embarrassed.

‘It was a big envelope, sort of lilac colour, sir.’

‘Well, it shouldn’t be too difficult to find then.’

The superintendent fell silent, absorbedly moving from one section of the little room to the next, neatly investigating every cranny, tirelessly turning over each possible hiding-place.

At last he straightened his back.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘I think we shall have to give up.’

‘Still, sir,’ said Peter, ‘it was only to check if old Miss Stitchford was telling the truth.’

‘Was it really? I have the impression it’s becoming rather more important than that. You see, if Pariss wasn’t murdered by a casual thief, then he was more than likely murdered by someone who knew him. And the fact that a private letter, personally delivered, is missing becomes a distinctly relevant factor.’

Peter came to a decision.

‘I think I can tell you a bit about that letter, sir,’ he said.

‘Well, that’s nice.’

‘It was probably from an old girl, name of Fay Curtis, who keeps a club not far from here. She gassed herself early this morning or late last night, and before she did she sent a note round to Teddy Pariss. As a matter of fact I learnt about it while I was round there and that was what I’d come to see him about.’

The superintendent’s eyebrows gently ascended.

‘Was it, indeed? You were there on duty, I take it?’

‘No, sir. More that I just happened to know her, sir. And –’

‘One moment, Constable. You said the lady was called Curtis?’

‘Yes, sir. Fay Curtis. Owner of Fay’s Place. You may know it, sir.’

‘No, I don’t often go to such haunts.’

‘No, sir. I meant –’

‘Any relation to June Curtis, Constable?’

‘Yes, sir. Mother, sir. As a matter –’

There came a brisk rap on the door. Jack thrust it open.

‘Miss June Curtis, sir,’ he said.

‘Ah,’ said the superintendent, ‘come in, Miss Curtis.’

June Curtis entered the little room, still wearing the swim-suit in which she had been rehearsing and carrying her big plastic wrist-disc loosely in one hand. It was immediately obvious that she stood a very good chance of becoming the year’s Miss Valentine.

Like a quality car of some sort her actual size, which was fairly extensive, was tactfully minimized by carefully calculated proportions. She had the finish and something of the well-emphasized but unstrident luxury of, say, a Bentley. Her hair was red, but by no means aggressive. Her face, though full and creamy-textured, did not sacrifice quite everything to achieving an impression of voluptuousness. She appeared to be, as Bert Mullens had so spontaneously remembered, 37 – 24 – 36.

Superintendent Ironside fetched the battered kitchen chair from the corner of the little square room and, giving it a flick over with his hand by way of a dust, placed it in front of the desk. He left Jack to seat June while he went and occupied the place recently vacated by Teddy Pariss, Esq.

He took out a note-book.

‘Now, it’s Miss June Curtis, isn’t it?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ June answered, giving nothing away.

‘Ah, good. And the address? Fay’s Place. Let me see, is that just off Dean Street, or what?’

A hardness crept on to June Curtis’s creamy smooth features.

‘That’s my mother’s address,’ she said. ‘I don’t happen to live there.’

‘Ah, I see. Then your address is what?’

‘Ten Black Horse Street, W.I.’

Superintendent Ironside's eyebrows rose lazily.

'That's Mayfair, isn't it?' he said.

'You can call it that.'

'A very nice address. The park quite near, isn't it? That must be very pleasant.'

'It's all right.'

'But expensive, I suppose. That's the trouble these days: everywhere's so expensive. Why, I recently bought a little cottage down in Essex to wear out the days of my retirement in, and, you know, even that cost a fortune.'

June did not respond. She sat on the shabby old upright chair superbly unconcerned. Back straight, head held nobly, faintly smiling into a far distance.

'You're not cold in here?' Ironside asked with sudden concern. 'I'm afraid someone switched off the fire. And someone else rather foolishly opened the window. At least I suppose it was someone else.'

'It is cold,' June said.

Ironside jumped up.

'Then we must remedy things,' he said.

He went across and pulled down the window. Then he stooped and looked at the fire.

'Hallo,' he said, 'switch already on.'

He traced the heavy black wire to the plug and pushed it home. Then he straightened quickly and shot a new question at June.

‘Was the fire on when you saw Mr Pariss here this morning?’

‘The fire? On?’

A frown appeared on June’s smooth forehead. To be quickly chased away. Frown lines are a girl’s worst friend.

‘I’m afraid I don’t happen to remember,’ she said with a fleck of crossness.

Ironside at once soothed her.

‘My dear young lady, it’s not of the least consequence. Not of the least consequence. I’m rather interested in the fire, I admit. It wasn’t on when we found –’

He paused delicately.

‘When we made our unfortunate discovery earlier on.’

June received the reminder of Teddy Pariss’s demise with calm.

‘But you’ll be anxious to go and change,’ Ironside resumed. ‘No one could want to wear a bathing costume in February. So let me ask you just this: how long were you in here with Mr Pariss?’

Surprisingly June did not answer straight away. Instead it could be seen that, without moving her statuesque pose, she was looking round behind her in the direction of Jack.

‘I’ve been trying to think,’ she said at last. ‘I suppose it was for about ten minutes. Just before half past one. Or perhaps just after

quarter past.'

Ironside bent forward to make a note.

'Quarter of an hour,' he said. 'One-fifteen to one-thirty. Perhaps earlier.'

'No,' said June. 'I told you ten minutes.'

'Oh, yes, yes. Ten minutes.'

Ironside carefully crossed out a word of his note and wrote something else.

'Excellent,' he said. 'And you came to do – Let me see, what did you say?'

'I didn't say.'

He smiled.

'No, of course not. But you were just going to.'

June looked at him with cold eyes above the smooth white of her cheeks.

'All right,' she said, 'I came in to have a chat with Teddy. I knew him a bit, and after all he's always one of the judges in his own contests. The one who counts.'

'Is that so now?' Ironside said. 'Now, I didn't know that.'

'I wouldn't think you knew much about this sort of thing anyhow.'

‘Well, no, I don’t. It’s a grave disadvantage. In fact, I’m counting on you to enlighten me, Miss Curtis. If you can spare the time. And if it’s not too cold for you.’

He turned to look at the Wurlitzer fire.

‘It certainly seems to be warming up,’ he said.

This was so. In only a few minutes the serried bars of the fire had heated the little room to and beyond stuffiness.

‘What do you want to know?’ June asked off-handedly.

Or with an impression of off-handedness.

‘Oh, everything, everything. I find the whole subject quite fascinating. When I’m established miles from anywhere in the Essex countryside with nothing to do but see to the matrimonial affairs of a number of rabbits I shall spend happy hours thinking about all this.’

June looked at him suspiciously. He did not appear put out. It was a look he must have got accustomed to.

‘Tell me, for instance,’ Ironside went on, joining both his large, gnarled hands together in front of him on the royally rich blotter of the late Teddy Pariss, ‘tell me, how does one judge a beauty? I mean, you said just now that Mr Pariss was the judge who counted. Just how does he add it all up?’

‘They use the skating system,’ said June defensively.

‘The skating system? Now I shall have to be told all about that.’

The faintest sign of a bored sigh puffed at June's full lips.

'It's the way they allocate points in the big skating contests, and the dance contests,' she said. 'Don't ask me exactly how it works: arithmetic was never my strong point.'

Almost forgetfully, she leant forward in the battered little chair to show what her strong points were.

'It has to do with giving marks for things like figure and deportment and smile, and then adding them up and mucking about with them,' she went on. 'It stops the judges rigging the answer. It's infallible, they say.'

'Yes, it sounds just that,' Ironside replied. 'So you felt it advisable to go and see Mr Pariss before the actual contest began?'

June smiled, taking the point. Though the smile was more luscious than the point would seem to have demanded.

'Yes,' she said, 'if you knew Teddy Pariss you'd realize that, skating system or no skating system, if he really wanted a girl to win, she'd be hard to stop.'

'And did he say he really wanted you to win, Miss Curtis?'

From under her heavy eye make-up June looked shrewdly across at the superintendent.

'No,' she answered slowly, 'as a matter of fact I didn't get any sort of promise.'

'Though you doubtless tried your best?'

From behind June there came a swift movement, swiftly checked, from the direction of Detective-Constable Spratt.

‘I talked to him,’ June said. ‘It means a lot to me, winning tonight.’

‘Yes, it must be a proud moment to be adjudged more attractive than any of these earnest strivers after beauty.’

‘Proud moment, my fanny.’

Ironside sat up.

‘Listen,’ said June Curtis, ‘I happen to want to live a good life, to get about, to see places, to meet people, not to have to pinch and scrape for a few quid all the time. Well, I’m lucky enough to have what it takes when it comes to beauty competitions. I found that out years ago, when I was a kid of sixteen. Only it took me longer than it should to get into the circus. But I’m there now and –’

‘One moment, if you’d be so kind,’ Ironside said with a great show of patiently begging a favour. ‘The circus? Now what circus is that? I’m getting confused.’

June, her passionate defence of her calling deflated, looked at him sourly.

‘The circus is what we call the girls who go round from one contest to another,’ she said. ‘We’re the professionals. Between us we count on clearing up all the big prizes. But we’ve worked for that, mind. There’s a lot to learn in this business.’

‘Is there, indeed? I’d never have thought so.’

Ironside contemplated this new idea.

‘Tell me something,’ he said. ‘Tell me just one thing that would be useful to me in a beauty contest. Supposing I entered for one.’

June looked at him without appreciation.

‘No, please,’ he said.

‘Oh, well,’ June said cautiously, ‘what is there? Well, take shoes.’

‘Shoes?’

‘Yes. It’s no use wearing just any old white shoes you happen to like. You’ve got to have really high heels, the highest you can walk in without wobbling. They make your legs look longer. And you’ve got to learn how to walk in them, to roll as you go. I’ve seen more than one little try-on fall flat on her stupid face.’

‘Dear me,’ said Superintendent Ironside.

He looked up.

‘Who was the amateur you’re afraid of?’ he asked.

‘I’ve got nothing to be afraid of.’

‘Yes, I can see that,’ Ironside said.

He dropped his eyes.

‘But all the same,’ he went on, ‘you are afraid of someone, aren’t you? Wasn’t that why you wanted to see Mr Pariss?’

‘Clever,’ June said. ‘And you’re right – in a way. Only I don’t know whether there was anyone or not. It was just an impression I

got. Sometimes the judges in these things go crazy and choose some silly kid just out of school who's been entered by her Mum or something.'

'That must be very embarrassing.'

'It's not embarrassing: it's downright criminal. Just because a lot of randy men decide all of a sudden to go for what they call "freshness and innocence" I stand to lose anything up to a couple of thousand quid straight cash, plus a chance of getting into the Miss Globe rating. And that means twenty thousand.'

'Twenty thousand pounds?'

Superintendent Ironside sounded incredulous.

'By the time you've done all the personal appearances, featured in all the ads and maybe got a part in a film, twenty thousand's putting it low.'

'Well, well. So there's a great deal at stake, by and large.'

June answered with a contemptuous glance.

'But, good gracious me,' Ironside said, 'here you are after a hard spell of rehearsing and we're not even offering you so much as a cup of tea.'

He looked up at Jack.

'See if you can rustle up some tea, Spratt,' he said.

'Bert Mullens has got a kettle,' Peter said.

‘Right,’ said Jack, grinning cheerfully at the sudden relaxation in the atmosphere, ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

He left with a slap-happy bang of the door.

Ironside shifted about in the late Teddy Pariss’s ultra-comfortable office chair. Opposite him June Curtis sat on the hard kitchen chair immobile and statuesque.

‘Yes,’ said Ironside, ‘I’m learning a lot.’

He leant forward towards June again.

‘Pariss,’ he said, ‘you can tell me about him now: your friend in the detective force needn’t get to know.’

June turned her head slightly.

‘It’s not that I care,’ she said. ‘But men make such a fuss. Look, you’ve probably got a pretty good idea what Teddy Pariss was like. He could’ve thrown this one for me, for a price.’

‘And you were paying?’ Ironside asked imperturbably.

‘Not yet, I wasn’t. Do you take me for a fool? You don’t have to give in to that sort of bloke every time. Not unless you like it.’

‘So you were – er – negotiating?’

‘I was asking him to look after me, and I was determined not to let him put his dirty little paws on me if I could help it. But some men have eight pairs of hands, you know.’

‘Yes,’ said Ironside, ‘I did know that.’

June looked surprised.

As far as the careful arrangement of her face permitted.

‘You can generally keep them under if you know how,’ she went on. ‘You pick on a weak spot in their vanity and laugh at them when they get too close for comfort.’

Ironsides reached forward and took one of the well-sharpened pencils from the heavy silver tray. He held it between the tips of his fingers.

‘You make it sound really quite easy,’ he said.

June shrugged slightly.

‘It’s not difficult,’ she replied.

‘Never?’

She looked at him with sudden calculation.

‘What is this?’

‘Nothing, my dear young lady. Nothing at all. I’m just learning what I can. I mean, I was wondering what happened when someone wouldn’t be put off by being laughed at.’

‘You mean, did I kill Teddy Pariss because he tried to get too fresh? Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve put up with worse than Teddy in my time.’

‘I’m glad to hear it, glad to hear it. So all that happened in here earlier was that you asked Pariss to do his best for you as a judge, and he made it plain that he would expect proper compensation for so much effort. Is that the picture?’

‘Yes, that’s it. Just that.’

Ironside appeared to be lost in deep contemplation.

After a while he pushed back the late Teddy’s heavy, well-sprung chair and began pacing up and down the little office. June made no attempt to follow his progress.

‘Excuse me,’ he said at last, ‘I’m afraid I’ve been thinking and I got rather carried away. It’s this question of time, don’t you know. I was trying to hit on a way of helping you to fix it.’

He turned to June.

‘Between quarter and half past one, only you’re not sure of either time. That was it, wasn’t it?’

June looked up.

‘No, it isn’t,’ she said. ‘You know quite well what time it was I left. Bert Mullens saw me coming out. I suppose you’ve talked to him. And not only that. I saw that little idiot Lindylou. She poked her head out of the judges’ room as I came by and then pulled it in again pretty sharp. As if she didn’t want me to see her. But I saw her and she saw me all right.’

Ironside took this calmly.

‘That’s splendid then,’ he said, prowling up and down the little office again. ‘I always feel much happier when I get at least one time pin-pointed. There’s a great deal to be said for having something certain in an uncertain world. A great –’

His restless prowling had brought him near the door. With a sudden tigerish leap he jerked it wide open.

Bert Mullens shot forward into the room, ear foremost.

10

As Bert Mullens's staggering feet crossed the white outline in the carpet that represented the body of Teddy Pariss, deceased, he began to recover himself. Next moment he was standing up by the little desk with its incongruous array of luxury fittings trying to look as if he had entered on purpose.

'This is convenient indeed,' Superintendent Ironside said. 'I was just trying to fix the time Miss Curtis left this office, Mullens, and she reminded me that you could probably tell us.'

Bert Mullens blinked his fishy eyes.

'What's that?' he said.

'A question of time,' Ironside explained patiently. 'You told me that you saw Miss Curtis coming out of the office here, did you not?'

'You mean before dinner?'

'Yes, that's when I mean.'

'Yes, I saw her. Just come out she had.'

'Splendid. And what time did you see her?'

'I told you before: twenty-five past one.'

'Ah, yes, twenty-five past. You're quite sure of that?'

'I have to keep my eye on the clock, like I told you. It's part of my job, that is.'

‘Excellent. Then we’ll call it twenty-five past. Unless – what’s that girl with the extraordinary name? – Ah, yes, unless Miss Lindylou Twelvetreets has other ideas.’

He swung round from the still blinking Bert to June.

‘Well, Miss Curtis,’ he said, ‘you’ve been most helpful. And if we want you again we shall see you at the contest this evening, I suppose?’

‘You don’t think I’m going to chuck that up because someone did for Teddy Pariss, do you?’ June said.

‘Well, no,’ said Ironside, ‘I don’t suppose that, to tell you the truth.’

June looked at him from under her long eyelashes and walked out.

Hardly had the door closed behind her than Superintendent Ironside was standing over Bert Mullens.

‘Listening at doors,’ he said. ‘That’s pretty nasty. I’m really surprised.’

His tone lacked sincerity.

‘I wasn’t listening at no door,’ Mullens said truculently.

‘Just happened to be passing?’

‘Yes, I just happened – Well, why shouldn’t I go past that door?’

Ironside smiled, with gentleness.

‘We’d agreed, I think,’ he said, ‘that you never deserted your post at the stage door. All those girls who might get out. Or was it all those boys who might get in?’

‘They’re packing up now,’ Bert said. ‘It’s been let out about Mr Pariss. They’re shutting up shop as a mark of respect.’

‘Shutting up shop? You mean there’ll be no Miss Valentine contest?’

‘Oh, no. That’s got to go on, ‘course it has. They’ll come back for that. But no more rehearsals.’

Ironside sighed.

‘We’ll just have to hope it goes all right without practice,’ he said.

Bert looked at him dubiously.

‘I’ll be going now, if there’s nothing you want,’ he muttered.

He began sidling towards the door. Providence, wise as ever, was on his side. The door opened with the utmost convenientness. Jack stood there with June Curtis’s unwanted cup of tea held carefully in his ham fist.

Bert ducked through the open doorway.

‘Wait,’ said Ironside, failing to heed the plain dictates of providence.

Bert halted in his tracks as if he had been lassoed.

‘I thought you wanted something,’ Ironside said to him.

‘Me? No, I didn’t want nothing.’

‘Not even to know how much we’d found out about you and Mr Pariss?’

Bert’s mouth, never wholly closed, dropped open even wider. But the superintendent added nothing to his last remark and at last Bert brought himself to slouch round and disappear in the direction of his box with shambling haste.

Ironside closed the door.

‘Well,’ Jack said cheerfully, sliding the unwanted teacup on to the desk, ‘was old Bert listening outside then?’

‘Do you think it means he killed Teddy Pariss?’ Peter asked the superintendent.

Ironside’s eyebrows rose.

‘Come, Lassington,’ he said, ‘if everybody who allowed their natural curiosity to get the better of them was accused of murder where should we be?’

But such a mild view of humanity was too much for Jack.

‘Look, sir,’ he said. ‘Pariss has been murdered. You yourself proved the open window was a fake. That points to someone inside. And when you look round it’s pretty easy to see Bert Mullens is as bent as could be.’

Ironside smiled.

‘I grant that Mr Mullens is very unprepossessing,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Peter broke in, ‘Bert may be ready to listen at doors and a good many other things. But that doesn’t mean he’s a killer.’

‘Ah, you think you know what makes a killer, do you?’ Ironside said. ‘Somehow I prefer to concentrate on facts, while I can get them.’

His voice got even more irritatingly hard to hear.

‘Facts such as the time June Curtis went back up that corridor outside there,’ he went on. ‘And what on earth Lindylou Twelvetimes was doing in the manager’s office at just that time.’

‘I’ll get that silly little idiot, sir, before she goes off,’ Peter said, taking the point.

‘That’s it,’ murmured Ironside.

And as Peter hurried out of the door he called out something more.

‘I think you’d better ask the other young ladies to wait five minutes too.’

Peter found the whole mass of beauties assembled in the one dressing-room, finishing getting dressed. He decided that this was no time to be other than businesslike.

He looked round till he spotted Lindylou, though it was not so easy to recognize her dressed for the street, and as firmly as he could he told her that the superintendent wanted to see her.

Lindylou became suddenly subdued.

‘This way,’ said Peter.

He marched her swiftly out of the dressing-room, round the corner by the manager’s office and down to the little room where Ironside was waiting.

‘Come in, Miss Twelvetimes,’ Ironside said genially. ‘Come in and sit down. There’s a tiny thing you could help us with. We won’t keep you a minute.’

Lindylou relaxed visibly and sat down.

‘Well, now,’ said Ironside, ‘let me get everything quite straight to begin with. Now your name is Twelvetimes, isn’t it? Lindylou Twelvetimes?’

Lindylou looked a little ruffled.

‘There’s nothing wrong with that,’ she said.

‘No, of course there isn’t.’

Lindylou glanced up at him. He was looking at her with the calm curiosity of some placid animal in the zoo.

‘Now, about your age?’ he asked.

‘Sixteen.’

‘As young as that?’

‘Well, what’s wrong with being sixteen? It’s old enough to be in the contest, and they made me bring my birth certificate and everything. They said too many girls have been going in for it before they should.’

‘That’s a very serious thing. And your address?’

Ironside’s aura of mild kindness was working well now. Lindylou gave him her address without fuss or comment.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘did you happen to notice what the time was when you came out of the judges’ room earlier on?’

Still swathed in Ironside’s soothing cocoon of gentleness, she answered without much anxiety.

‘You mean when I saw this chap?’

She glanced round at Peter.

‘I can explain, sir,’ Peter said. ‘The young lady seems to have been in the judges’ room twice. The first time must have been round about ten to one. She came nipping out and ran straight into me.’

Lindylou giggled.

‘I was it the altogether,’ she said to Ironside.

‘Were ycu, indeed? That must have been embarrassing for Constable Lassington.’

Another giggle.

‘Well, he did look a bit put out like.’

‘I’ve no doubt. But what about the second time you were in there?’

Lindylou looked down at the floor.

‘How do you know there were two times?’ she said.

‘There just were,’ said Ironside. ‘But what I want to find out is what the time was when you came out the second time.’

‘You must have been talking to that June Curtis.’

‘Well, what time was it you saw her, then?’

‘I dunno. Really, I don’t. I never do know the time.’

She blinked her wide eyes up at Ironside. It looked as if she was trying to put over a whopper.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘I believe you.’

‘Well, that’s a change,’ she said.

‘And what were you doing in there anyhow?’ Ironside asked as he walked over to the door to let her out.

Lindylou pouted.

‘I suppose I got to tell you.’

‘Yes, you have.’

‘Oh, well, then. It was like this. Some of the girls told me there was only one way to make sure of doing well in a show like this, and that was to let the judges see you in the – Well, the way I was. They said they’d remember you again that way.’

‘I see.’

Ironside turned to Peter.

‘Did you remember her again, Constable?’

Peter blushed.

‘Well, sir. . .’

‘Well?’

‘To tell the truth, sir, it was a bit difficult to pick her out just now, when she’d got all her clothes on.’

Ironside looked at Lindylou.

‘I see,’ he said.

Politely he held the door open for her.

‘Well, bye-bye,’ she said to him.

And out she went with a pretty little flounce.

‘You know,’ Jack said, ‘it could be true that business about what the girls said to her. I remember a story of June’s about how they told a little girl from the depths of Wales or somewhere that the way to win a contest was to put on her backless swim-suit the wrong way round. She did it too. And one threat to the circus girls left in a hurry.’

‘On the other hand,’ Peter said thoughtfully, ‘there was nothing to stop Lindylou paying a call on Teddy as soon as June was clear. She could have even got out of the window next door and in at this one.’

‘What I want to know at this moment,’ Ironside said with a touch of grimness, ‘is just how that girl got past our friend Mullens without being seen. And whether any of the others did the same thing.’

Jack and Peter looked at each other.

‘Come on,’ Ironside said, ‘we’ll talk to those girls to start with.’

They tramped along the narrow corridor up to the manager’s office, turned into the wide corridor and waited while Ironside knocked on the door of the girls’ dressing-room.

A chorus of twittering screams answered, but when after a discreet pause Ironside opened the door it was evident that there had been nothing much to scream about. The girls were almost ready to step out into the waiting world.

The overwhelming impression at the door was of a mass of bits of the feminine, at their most blatant. Mouths, lipstick-shaped in screaming red, unlikely pink, heavy magenta, darted here, there and everywhere, pouting, smiling, sulking. Legs in shimmering nylon and tight-stretched ski-pants waved and flaunted. Blouses and hugging jerseys, A cup, B cup, C cup, advanced and flirted. Fingernails in every shade and circumstance of red flickered, pointed, lured and beckoned. Guaranteed personal freshness from spray, bottle and tube clashed and mingled all around.

From the chaos Ironside brought order like a sedulous botanist in a wild garden. Inflexibly he set Jack and Peter to work, listing names and addresses, cross-checking from one to the other, making sure that each and every girl had been under someone’s eye during the whole possible time that Teddy Pariss was murdered.

They waded through an immense mass of miscellaneous information on their way to sorting out the few clear facts they

wanted.

Jack had to adjudicate on a quarrel over whether Flaveen had or had not put grease on Carol's comb, thus causing her blonde beehive to collapse in ignominy. But he learnt that Carol and Flaveen were inseparable and actually had been so for the whole time in question.

Peter was treated to a long, anxious self-communion on the subject of swim-suits, whether percale cotton (which showed) or jersey (which clung) was likely to be the most effective, and whether, rules or no rules, it was worth, in the extreme urgency of the case, slipping just a tiny bit of sponge rubber in at the top.

'I mean, I know there's no point in cheating on the rule about no bones in the bra. I mean, I know if you use some really stretchy stretch elastic that does it just as well. But if you had my figure, what would you do? Honestly?'

Peter asked her whether she had been the one to suggest to Lindylou her particular desperate expedient.

She had not.

A girl with heavy lipstick carried really very high above her hard little lips and black smudged with the grossest optimism above and below her sharp little eyes chose Superintendent Ironside as her father confessor.

'Charm, and be natural,' she said. 'That's my recipe. And I'm not in the circus for nothing. I mean to say, can you blame me if I told

that silly kid she looked smashing? I don't want her to stop wearing that ridiculous necklace.'

She took a smudgy piece of cotton wool, dipped it heavily in a jar of face powder and dabbed with anxiety at a tiny group of spots under her left ear.

Ironside looked on dispassionately.

'Were you the one who put that idea into Lindylou's head?' he said.

The charm merchant shrugged her shoulders.

'There's another silly kid. What do they want to come butting in for?'

'So you did?'

'Certainly, I did. Serve her right.'

'Did you help her get past the stage-door keeper?'

'Yes. Wouldn't have been no good if she hadn't got past him.'

'How did you manage that now?'

The hard, thin lips smiled. And were natural.

'Easy. We all agreed to gather round him and ask him a lot of questions, like could we have a boy in. And while he was getting in a stew over that, Lindylou slipped along there. The silly little bitch, she never got caught.'

'No, that's certainly a great pity. Better luck next time.'

‘Next time? We’ve tried it twice. There can’t be a next time.’

‘No, I suppose not. We’ll just have to trust to charm in front of the judges then.’

‘Yeah, I suppose so.’

She peered intently into the big mirror with its surround of glaring, naked light bulbs. The spots were invisible. Well, almost.

And then it was all over. The girls streamed out and the three policemen sat and compared notes. The facts that had so painfully emerged were clear. Of all the girls only June and Lindylou had at any time been away from the others on their own.

‘There’s just one thing,’ said Ironside. ‘We’ll have to make sure from Mullens whether the girls played that trick on him twice, or three times.’

‘I expect he’s still keeping guard in that box of his,’ Peter said.

‘Regular old sentry-go,’ grinned Jack.

But when they left the dressing-room they found that things were not as they had fondly imagined.

Bert Mullens was lying slumped on the floor of his little box in a decidedly ugly heap.

11

Peter and Jack raced each other to the glass-walled stage-door keeper's box. They both managed to crowd in and kneel to examine Bert Mullens's huddled body.

Superintendent Ironside walked up slowly behind them. He stood watching at the door of the box. Peter pushed himself to his feet.

'He's not dead, sir,' he said.

Jack, still kneeling, looked up.

'Doesn't even seem to have much wrong with him,' he said. 'Except that he's flat out. Can't get a glimmer of sense out of him.'

'Well, suppose you use that telephone to call an ambulance,' Ironside said. 'The poor fellow seems to be in need of some sort of attention.'

Jack got to his feet and put the call through. Ironside knelt for a moment to make his own examination.

'Dear me, yes,' he said. 'He's certainly not bothered by anything very much at the moment.'

Before he scrambled up he took the precaution of placing a fist in the small of his back where the arthritis lurked.

'I've been taking a look round, sir,' Peter said. 'I don't see any sign of a pill box or medicine bottle.'

Ironside wagged a finger at him.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘I knew when I asked to have you to help me that I’d chosen a lad of intelligence and resource.’

For an instant Jack lost his grin.

‘How does all this fit in, sir?’ he asked Ironside. ‘It’s a bit of a puzzler to me, I admit.’

‘There’s something to be said for confessing ignorance, I suppose,’ Ironside replied.

They waited for something more.

Nothing came.

With wholly commendable promptitude an ambulance arrived clanging and shrieking at the stage door, and soon the still totally unresponsive form of Bert Mullens, listener at doors and recorder of vital statistics, was carted off.

‘So,’ said Ironside as the ambulance doors closed, ‘and what did you make of the smell on his breath?’

Jack’s face fell. Peter’s face fell.

‘You mean, alcohol? He’d drunk himself stupid?’ Peter said.

‘People do that,’ said Ironside.

Jack frowned.

‘Well,’ he said with unshaken cheerfulness, ‘I still don’t understand.’

‘No,’ Ironside said, ‘there are a good many things in this business one doesn’t understand. There are moments when I wish I’d started

my retirement last week. Why should I beat my brains out for Teddy Pariss?’

He looked gloomily down.

Suddenly he shot a glance at Peter.

‘What is particularly puzzling about the case?’ he said.

Peter thought.

‘Well, sir,’ he answered, ‘there was that phone call I got when I was at home, the one telling me that someone was doing the safe here.’

‘Splendid, Lassington. I thought you might have forgotten all about that.’

Peter looked rueful.

‘To tell the truth, sir,’ he said, ‘I wouldn’t have been at all surprised if it had been forgotten. There’s been plenty of other things to think about.’

‘Oh, yes, yes,’ Ironside agreed. ‘We’ve been presented with a mass of information one way and another. However, much of it though passionately interesting is obviously scarcely relevant. It’s the relevant items that worry me.’

‘Such as?’ Jack asked.

‘Such as the fire that wasn’t on, Constable Spratt.’

‘Oh, yes, sir. There is that.’

‘You don’t sound very enthusiastic about it.’

‘Well, sir, it’s a fact that I’m not. I mean, it’s only a fire that someone didn’t switch on. I can’t see there’s all that much to it.’

‘No? Yet it’s a very odd circumstance. Teddy Pariss, the comfort lover. The big, specially bought fire. And no attempt made to use it.’

‘All the same, sir,’ Jack persisted, ‘it’s a pretty small thing.’

‘Oh, yes, small enough. And in the end it may turn out to be just some ordinary oversight. But in this trade the thing to look out for is the deviation from normal. The little thing that oughtn’t to have been done and was, or ought to have been done and wasn’t.’

He swung round to Peter.

‘Tell me about that phone call, Lassington.’

Peter gathered himself together.

‘Well, there wasn’t much to it, sir,’ he said. ‘The wife answered it first, as a matter of fact. And when I went and picked up the receiver a voice, a man’s voice I didn’t recognize, just said that someone was doing the safe here at that moment.’

‘Would you recognize the voice again?’ Ironside asked.

‘I don’t think so, sir. It was sort of hoarse, that’s all. He only said about half a dozen words before he rang off.’

‘Have you got any friends in the criminal fraternity?’

‘Well, sir, yes. I mean, it’s a good thing to know what’s going on, isn’t it?’

‘Provided you’re aware of the dangers, there are advantages, yes.’

‘Well, I do know one or two snouts, sir.’

‘Was this one of them?’

‘Not so far as I can tell, sir.’

‘You say your wife took the call first?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then I think I shall give myself the pleasure of calling on the good lady.’

‘Mary, sir?’

‘If that’s her name. We’ll go now. You told me it was only two or three minutes away.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then a word to the Yard to tell them where I’ve gone, and we’ll be off.’

But they were not off.

‘Superintendent. Superintendent.’

From round the corner of the little passageway leading to the ballroom itself Daisy Stitchford had come.

Superintendent Ironside stopped, turned and stood looking at her. She came clickety-clicking along towards them, eyes behind polished spectacles darting and peering.

The superintendent let her come.

‘Superintendent, a word with you, if you please.’

‘Certainly. Shall we step in here?’

Ironside politely held open the door of the empty judges’ room. Daisy marched in, took a quick look round at the shiny veneered table and the row of unsullied pink blotters, and – her inventory completed – turned to the superintendent. Peter and Jack slipped quietly in behind her and stood bulky but unobtrusive with their backs to the wall near the door.

‘Now, is there something I can do for you?’ Ironside said.

‘There is. You can hear me out in silence.’

‘I shall try.’

Daisy Stitchford pursed her prim little lips together as if to concentrate herself.

‘You warned me not long ago,’ she began, ‘that I was wrong to withhold information from the police. At the time I decided I would follow my own counsel. Now I have decided to tell you something.’

Ironside let his grave gaze flick away from Daisy’s face to snap a warning glance at his two impetuous helpers in case they should jump in with questions about why such a resolutely made-up mind had been changed in such a short time.

Daisy gave a little dry cough.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I knew Teddy Pariss better than a secretary should, no matter how many years she’d been with him.’

She looked at Ironside possibly expecting to find him betraying curiosity. Had she known him longer she would have known better.

‘Well,’ she went on, ‘if you must know, I was Teddy Pariss’s mistress thirty years ago.’

Her desiccated form straightened.

‘I was the longest lasting of them all,’ she said with a little jet of pride. ‘Teddy wasn’t a man to stay faithful to a woman. He was through with most of them in a week. But he wasn’t through with me. I was his for two whole years. Two years.’

She looked round through little pebble-lensed, bright spectacles as if she expected someone to challenge such a daring statement out of hand.

Nobody spoke.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘for two years. And at the end of it I knew too much for Master Teddy. Much too much.’

The fiercely jutting little round chin dropped.

‘So he made me his secretary,’ she said. ‘You see, he had his hold on me too. So he used me for all those years. And precious little he paid me.’

The corners of her mouth turned down.

Ironside continued to look at her gravely.

‘He used you,’ he said. ‘And you used him. Isn’t that it?’

‘Used him? Used Teddy Pariss? You haven’t got an idea.’

‘Ah, I think you misunderstand. I’m afraid I didn’t think of you as exactly ruling that masterful figure. But I did think of you as using the influence your position gave you.’

From behind the glint of the highly-polished spectacles came a shrewd look of appraisal.

‘I did my job,’ Daisy said.

‘And I’m sure you did it to perfection,’ said Ironside.

Daisy’s hackles unexpectedly rose.

‘Don’t you think I liked that man,’ she snapped. ‘I worked for him because I had to, and for no other reason. But I hated him. Hated him.’

‘Indeed?’ said Ironside.

‘Yes, indeed. Oh, I realize it’s hardly sensible to confess to hating a man who’s had a knife put in him, but I confess to it.’

‘There’s the time element,’ said Ironside mildly.

‘The time –? Oh, you realize that I know I can confess to hating Teddy in safety. Well, he was killed when I was in the ballroom with dozens of people to witness it. Yes, I know that. And I’m thankful for it. I’ve had the last trouble I’m going to have from Teddy Pariss.’

‘We must certainly all hope so,’ said the superintendent.

Daisy looked at him as if she was by no means sure whether to say thank-you or to fly off the handle.

A condition frequent enough with those who had the misfortune to have many dealings with Charles Ironside.

Who now smiled.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘I don’t really ever expect anyone to pay attention to my little sermons.’

‘What sermons?’ Daisy asked, deciding definitely to be irritated.

‘Perhaps you don’t remember: I preached you a few words on the desirability of telling everything to the nice, kind policeman.’

‘Oh, that.’

Scorn came easily to Daisy.

‘That,’ she repeated, ‘you don’t think you’d have made me change my mind if I hadn’t wanted to, do you?’

Ironside appeared to consider this. Daisy did not wait for a verdict.

‘I thought over what you’d been asking me,’ she said, ‘and I realized that from the times you’d mentioned I couldn’t possibly be suspected of killing Teddy. So I decided to tell you before you came poking and prying round trying to find out.’

‘Very sensible,’ commented Ironside.

Daisy glaring through sharply shining spectacles turned and marched out.

‘Very interesting,’ Jack said the moment the door was closed. ‘Who’d have thought that little dried-up, old stick of a thing could

ever have been anyone's mistress, let alone Teddy Pariss's?'

A thought struck him.

'I say,' he added with a wide grin, 'you don't think she's going in for a spot of the old fantasy, do you?'

'Could be,' Peter said. 'But if you do a bit of arithmetic you'll find it's all perfectly possible. Knock thirty years off Daisy Stitchford and you'd find quite a spry little piece, I'll bet.'

'Knock thirty years off,' said Jack. 'I reckon the thirty years have knocked plenty off her. Still, come to think of it, you can see that if she was rounded out a bit here and there she might have been quite a dish once.'

'But as she was in the ballroom when Teddy was killed it hardly matters, I suppose,' said Peter.

'Let's accept Constable Lassington's suppositions,' Ironside said. 'We were on our way somewhere, I think.'

'Perhaps we ought to ring up before we go?' Peter said. 'I mean, Mary may have gone shopping or something.'

'It's only round the corner, isn't it?' the superintendent said. 'I think we'll risk it.'

'Yes, sir. Of course, sir. It was just that I thought. . .'

'Well, we must allow one or two undisciplined thoughts. This way?'

'This way, sir.'

And, when after their short walk past the pubs and the mysterious closed clubs, past the dark barbers' shops and the bright grocers they reached the flat, Mary Lassington was there after all. As, considering the still conscientiously falling cold rain, might have been expected. Peter introduced the superintendent.

Ironside looked round the flat with unconcealed curiosity.

'Well, well,' he said, 'this is a great deal nicer than the station house, eh, Constable?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Very comfortable, very comfortable. Chairs by the fire. The domestic purr of the television set. And, yes, I do believe that's a half-knitted pullover I see there.'

Mary laughed.

'I spoil him, sir, and that's a fact,' she said.

'Ah, no,' said Ironside. 'A police constable cannot have too stable a background. And, bless me, I think he deserves all the creature comforts he can get, poor laddie.'

And it was altogether a very long time before Ironside got round to asking the question he had come to put. All the while he prowled about, picking up this and that, making comments, patting and poking.

'Well, Spratt, have you got a home like this?' he asked.

'Bit farther out, sir. We need somewhere bigger with the kids.'

‘But like this, like this, eh? All these home comforts? My, but I wouldn’t have believed it possible when I was a young constable.’

It all seemed to delight Mary. She smiled, she blushed, she offered tea. And Ironside accepted. He praised the tea. He praised the cake.

‘Oh, yes, that telephone call,’ he said at last. ‘Now tell me something about that.’

Mary told him about it to the last detail. Though, disappointingly enough, almost the only detail she had to tell was that the call had been made from a coin box.

‘Oh, dear me, yes,’ said Ironside. ‘I know how it is. You pick up the receiver, you hear the clatter of the coin dropping and then this voice. You call out for your husband and you think no more about it.’

Mary smiled.

‘Yes, that’s really how it was,’ she said.

‘You’ve done it so many times before.’

‘Well, I have. He won’t stir when he gets in that chair of his, you know. Just sits there. Reading some old magazine of mine. Looking at the pictures of the pretty girls.’

Ironside nodded gravely.

‘And was the voice today like the voices before?’ he asked.

Mary considered, equally gravely.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘it was and it wasn’t. It could have been a voice I’d heard before, or it might not.’

‘Never mind, never mind,’ Ironside said. ‘You’ve done –’

The telephone, perhaps hearing itself mentioned, shrilled out. Mary leapt up to answer it. Ironside’s eyes beamed appreciation.

‘It’s for you,’ Mary said to him.

Tactfully she took the tea things out to the kitchen.

‘For me?’ Ironside said. ‘Now who could be wanting an old foggy like me?’

The doctor who had been busy with Bert Mullens was wanting him. To say that Bert was still far away.

‘Poor fellow, poor fellow,’ said the superintendent.

He listened attentively again.

‘A sleeping tablet? I see. Do you know which it was?’

Again he listened.

‘Well, now, that’s most ingenious. Most ingenious of you. Dear me, yes. I shall have to draw the attention of those who want to know about such things to this. And it’s quite easy to get, is it? Well, that’s a scandal, certainly.’

Gently he set the receiver on its rest.

Jack was unable to contain himself.

‘Drugged, sir? Has Mullens been drugged?’

‘Yes, indeed, poor chap. With a common form of sleeping pill, distressingly easy to obtain. They’ve no doubt about it, you know. Analysis and all that. Wonderful fellows, really.’

A sudden doubt rose up in Peter’s mind.

‘But, sir,’ he said, ‘I thought you told us that it was drink that knocked him out.’

‘Drink?’ said Ironside.

Jack came charging in to Peter’s aid.

‘Yes, sir. You asked us if we’d smelt Mullens’s breath.’

‘Oh, indeed, I did that. I’m sorry you didn’t take the precaution. If you had, you’d have observed there wasn’t a trace of alcohol at all. That was the interesting thing.’

12

Detective-Constable Spratt grinned ruefully and glanced at Constable Lassington to seek what moral support he could get.

‘Well, sir,’ he said to Ironside, ‘you had us there all right. No alcohol on old Mullens’s breath: no question of being dead drunk.’

‘Yes,’ said Peter, ‘but if he wasn’t dead drunk, what had happened to him? If he took a massive dose of sleeping pills like that himself, it’s practically a confession.’

‘And the poor fellow still unconscious,’ said Ironside.

Peter looked at him.

‘Did they say if he was in danger, sir?’ he asked.

Ironside smiled slightly.

‘I gather they expect him to recover quite soon,’ he said.

‘Well,’ said Peter, ‘it’ll be interesting to hear what he has to say.’

He looked at the others. Suddenly Jack’s face coloured up.

‘It could still be June,’ he said. ‘I keep thinking that. We’ve only her word for it that Pariss was alive when she left him.’

‘No,’ said Peter forcefully. ‘There’s no need to think that. Mullens could just as easily have nipped along to the office when the coast looked clear.’

But Jack was not to be put off.

‘All the same,’ he said, ‘June was in with Teddy Pariss up to twenty-five past one. And there’s no use pretending she wasn’t.’

Ironside looked at him blandly.

‘Ah, Spratt,’ he said, ‘if that were indeed established there would be no use in questioning it. But, you know, it’s far from established.’

‘What’s far from established?’ Jack said, with regrettable belligerency.

‘That your June Curtis saw Teddy Pariss at all.’

Peter came quickly in before Jack could say anything totally irretrievable.

‘But, sir,’ he said, ‘Mullens saw June coming out of Teddy’s office. And she says she was in there. You couldn’t have much clearer evidence than that.’

Ironside smiled gently.

‘Except that Mullens said nothing of the sort.’

Before either of the two constables could burst into rage he held up a warning hand.

‘What Mullens actually said,’ he went on, ‘was that he saw her coming out, closing the door. He never said he heard her inside, or saw the door open for her to come out.’

‘But –’

Both constables spoke together.

‘A mere matter of wording,’ Ironside said. ‘I know what your objection must be. But you should think twice before staking your infant careers on that. It struck me all along that there was something a little wrong about the interview June said she had with Pariss. It was simply that, you remember, we noticed no smell of perfume in Pariss’s office. And yet your Miss Curtis is the sort of girl who wouldn’t feel dressed without cosmetics.’

Neither Jack nor Peter had any comment.

‘But I might never have had any real suspicions,’ Ironside added, ‘if it hadn’t been for the draught in the corridor.’

‘The draught in the corridor?’ Peter said.

Ironside smiled broadly.

‘Oh, Constable, you voice those doubts so delightfully. And yet, you know, there’s no need for them. All you have to do is to bear with me. The draught came from the slightly open double doors at the end of the corridor. I asked you to close them. You know, I wouldn’t be in the least surprised, taking that into consideration, to find that Miss Curtis instead of being with Pariss was out in that depressing little yard.’

‘Out in the yard?’ Jack said. ‘But why would she want to go out there?’

‘That, Spratt, is what we have to discover.’

He looked at his watch.

‘Dear me, time is flying. I’m afraid we’ve trespassed too long on Mrs Lassington’s hospitality. We must be off. Great things will be happening at the Star Bowl ballroom.’

Peter looked at the clock.

‘You mean the contest will be beginning before long?’ he said.
‘Do you want to see June Curtis before that?’

Ironside smiled.

‘I think we’ll do just the opposite,’ he said. ‘I think we’ll wait to see Miss Curtis till the moment she steps off the catwalk, as they see fit to call it.’

Peter could not stop himself giving Jack a quick look. Jack licked at his lips.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Ironside, ‘cruel, I grant you. The poor creature will be just relaxing after the ordeal of judgement, and all that. But we have to choose the moment she’s most likely to help us, you know.’

The Star Bowl, when they got back there, was a very different place. Although the rain was stoically battering away still at the yellow-grey pavements and the impervious glossy concrete and glass exterior of the ballroom itself, it was being met by a stoicism every bit as impassive from the citizens of London gathered to watch the fun. Squealing girls in glossy mackintoshes shoved and giggled as if rain had never been invented. Their young admirers jostled and jeered in unemphatic defiance of the elements. The traditional rites of shrill whistles and deep booing groans were as thoroughly carried

out as if the cold enmity of the rain was part of another world. This was the spirit which had won battles from Agincourt to Waterloo.

A row of constables at the edge of the pavement kept the crowd in decorous check, the rain gleaming on their helmets and dripping implacably from their capes. Two of them, recognizing the superintendent, forced back the solidly enthusing teenagers to make way for him.

But the safety of the dry, deodorized foyer proved to be only comparative. Warm and dry in the blue-carpeted luxuriousness a pack of reporters was waiting.

The moment Ironside shoved his way in through the heavy swinging glass doors they began to sweep forward. There was a moment's check as the leading jackal recognized his prey.

‘Oh, hell,’ he shouted, ‘it’s Ironside. Nothing but bloody joking.’

But with sturdy pluck the others pushed forward and in a moment Ironside was surrounded.

‘Hey, Super, are you pulling in one of the girls?’

‘Listen, is it right a naked girl was found standing over the body?’

‘Is it true old Teddy Pariss was trying to date one of the competitors tonight?’

Ironside looked round at them all. He asked a question of his own. Once more he failed to raise his voice to the necessary pitch to be heard. The reporters shushed each other angrily.

They looked up at Ironside.

‘I asked if there was anybody here from the agricultural Press,’ he said. ‘There’s one or two things worrying me about my new rabbit hutches.’

‘Look,’ said a short, tubby, florid-faced reporter with big, round spectacles, ‘are you going to give us anything or not?’

He glared at the craggy form of the superintendent.

‘Well, no,’ said Ironside, ‘I’m not.’

He stepped forward. Somehow the ring of avid hunters broke. Ironside went on into the ballroom itself. Jack and Peter kept close to his heels. The orange-uniformed commissionaire clung to the door behind them and began a bitter and prolonged argument with the reporters.

Inside again, the scene was changed. All the looping black cables which had been Sergeant Milk’s downfall had been banished. And with them had gone the unsavoury taggle of advertising sponsors, variety agents and photographers. Instead the huge ballroom floor, glossier than ever, had been covered with little tables each with its soft pink tablecloth and soft pink light. Most of them were already filled with their quota of gaily expectant customers. The others were filling up fast.

Presiding over the whole scene at the back of the shallow stage, set off to perfection by the deep blue of the drapes, was an enormous, flower-surrounded, tenderly pink, glossily burgeoning

heart. It almost looked as if it was throbbing with pure pleasure. And in front of it stood the victor's golden throne.

Superintendent Ironside looked his fill in silence.

He turned to Peter and Jack.

'Come along,' he said in that quiet, quiet voice.

They found themselves a corner near the little door leading backstage.

'This should do very well,' Ironside said. 'I'm afraid you'll have to stand, but we'll be able to keep a good eye on Miss Curtis and get some idea of how all this is affecting her. It's a matter of duty.'

Jack nodded cheerfully.

'Bit of luck for me,' he said. 'I wasn't sure I was going to get here to see June. And here I am in a front row seat, except that there's no seat.'

Peter laughed at the joke. The huge room was warm and comfortable. He leant against the delicate-hued wall and relaxed. All round about he heard the contented chatter of the expectant audience.

A slight discordant note struck his ear. He looked quickly and cautiously from side to side.

And in a moment he located the source of the faint, irritable ripple on the happy millpond. Two middle-aged men in smooth

suits, sitting together at one of the little tables, seemed to be having a disagreement.

With a London policeman's developed sense for nosing out impending trouble, Peter concentrated on the two men till he could make out quite clearly just what they were saying.

'Look here,' the podgier of the two snapped, 'that girl of yours is a nice property, but if you ask me she's got an agent who's getting a bit above himself.'

'Are you insulting me?' said the other man. 'Because if so . . .'

He pushed back his little gilt chair in a thoroughly aggressive manner.

Peter glanced from side to side to make sure there was no obstruction between him and the scene of the quarrel.

'No, no,' the podgy man said quickly. 'Don't misunderstand me, old chap. All I'm saying is that to ask that much for the rights to the torso is plain ridiculous.'

'All right, all right. You want to know how much I got for the legs? Before she's even won this bout?'

'I don't care if you got a couple of thousand for the legs. I'm not a stockings firm. It's the torso we're interested in, and that's not worth more than two-fifty to any bra outfit in the business.'

'Two-fifty. Now you're just talking nonsense.'

Peter relaxed again. Business is business.

Before much longer the show began. Mr Brown, transformed almost as effectively as his establishment by a midnight-blue dinner jacket in place of his check waistcoat, came on to the stage in a concatenation of spotlights. The spruce orchestra which had replaced the piano-player with the addition to Civil Defence gave him a welcoming blare.

He bowed deeply. The chatter hushed. He began to tell the audience about the wonders they were going to see.

‘You know,’ Ironside whispered, ‘it’s astonishing the versatility to be found in the most unexpected places. Here’s this chap with such talent for elegant phrases and refined jollity. You wouldn’t think he could combine that and the stark disciplinarianism we saw this afternoon, would you?’

Jack and Peter exchanged a glance but neither offered a reply.

Preceded by a reverent eulogy from Mr Brown, the aspirants to the title of Miss Valentine now came on to the platform. They too had progressed. No longer did they cluster together in a chilly huddle. Instead one by one they sauntered on to the stage and stood as statuesquely as they could in a well-spaced line, like Greek goddesses on the top of some convenient temple. They were to begin the contest in evening dress and made, in consequence, nobly contrasting great splashes of colour against the deep blue of the draped curtains. Except for the girl who had inadvertently chosen exactly the same blue.

Down in the corner by the pass-door Jack sighed appreciatively.

‘Pretty smashing bunch,’ he said. ‘Old June’s going to have to beat some tough competition.’

‘We must have faith that she will,’ Ironside said. ‘I feel that, flushed with success, she’ll be really extraordinarily vulnerable.’

Mr Brown’s reverent drone rose to its climax. The band entered with gusto upon the tune the piano-player had beaten out so wearily so many times that morning. The first contestant, Miss Greater Bloomsbury, 37 – 25 – 37, smoothed her long white gloves, lifted up her head bravely, and plunged. To the sensuous sway of the music she made her way down on to the catwalk, stopped as she reached the judges’ table, smiled with intensity, and walked on.

At a discreet nod from Mr Brown, hardly reminiscent at all of his ineffectual yell of the afternoon, Number Two, Miss Rose Grower – a big rose, made of velvet, at her bosom and a look of magnificent confidence on her incurably horse-shaped face – set off on the same dangerous journey.

And one by one they followed, while the orchestra suavely and tirelessly played their tune. Lindylou Twelvetrees distinguished herself in two ways: by the patent anxiety of the lick she gave her lips before she hitched up her long skirt and started on the dangerous tour of the catwalk, and by the blatancy of the wink she gave the judges at the moment she paused to receive their scrutiny.

June, who followed her, was unable to control a fleeting expression which the uncharitable would have called a sneer. But it passed and she trod the softly carpeted catwalk with an easy professionalism, skilfully milking applause in a well-timed crescendo from the huge audience. She provided a noticeable contrast with the way the less practised contestants reserved every ounce of their charms for the judges, only to appear to be trying too hard.

Jack's eyes gleamed.

'She'll do it,' he said. 'That's my girl.'

Superintendent Ironside turned towards him but refrained from comment.

With wiggling hips or arms moving as if on wires, the rest of the contestants bore the judges' scrutiny, ogling or simpering as each thought most effective. At last they were all back on the stage forming a bevy of beauty round the great, pink, throbbing heart and the empty, waiting throne in front of it.

'Yes, you know,' said Ironside as the band gracefully brought the interminable parade tune to an end, 'this is a great improvement on a cattle show. The girls have got much more sense of discipline. You wouldn't get one of them trying to munch somebody's coat on the way past.'

Peter laughed.

'It's a sight more interesting than a cattle show too,' he said. 'I mean, some of those girls are smashers.'

Ironside sighed.

‘I suppose so, I suppose so,’ he said. ‘Certainly the memory of this is going to spoil the shows I’d looked forward to in my retirement. They were going to be little events to break up the monotony.’

Jack grinned broadly and nodded up towards the glamorous group round the big heart.

‘They’re not exactly a retirement sport,’ he said.

‘No, I think I’d agree to that,’ said Ironside gravely.

On the stage, Mr Brown finished describing the girls once more for the benefit of the customers. He brought his little speech to a vibrant conclusion.

The girls stood and looked at him.

He smiled back.

It was perhaps just noticeable that the eyes behind the smile were unpleased.

‘All right, girls,’ he said with a laugh, ‘off you go now. I know the customers here would like to look at you all night, but you’ve got to get into those swim-suits.’

He turned to the customers.

‘Oh, boy,’ he said.

The girls, with swift intelligence, took the hint and filed neatly off the platform.

During the interval while the girls changed into their swim-suits and the customers in the ballroom were pressed to eat and drink and make merry, the superintendent, followed by his two wary shadows, prowled round the area back-stage. His presence caused considerable annoyance.

The ruddy-faced Mr Brown, in spite of his midnight-blue dinner jacket, was quite like his old self when he addressed the girls briefly before going back on stage.

‘Now, listen,’ he said, ‘some of you were going too slow on the catwalk. Don’t think I didn’t notice. I know you all imagine you can steal an extra round of applause by staying out there. But you won’t get away with it. By cripes, I’ll have you disqualified before you can so much as wiggle your bottom, you see if I don’t.’

He gave them a final comforting glare and slipped on to the stage. As Ironside, Jack and Peter came through the pass-door they heard the beginning of his speech.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I’m sure you’ll agree that this is the greatest bunch of little sports you’ve ever seen on any competition platform. Well, I just want to say that I agree with you. Absolutely.’

Superintendent Ironside had to speak quite loudly to make himself heard above the waves of applause.

‘I’m reassured to hear that,’ he said. ‘I was beginning to think that the evils of professionalized sport had intruded even here.’

Jack shrugged his shoulders with a grin.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘he can’t tell the customers the girls would do anything to win, can he? I mean, they wouldn’t like it.’

‘I stand rebuked,’ said Ironside.

There was a roar of applause which made even this much conversation impossible. The great little sports were filing back on to the platform.

The spirit of the contest was at a peak now. Each entrant’s start on her final run was heralded by a really frenzied burst of clapping from their particular supporters. Tears were ready to be shed, tempers were looking to be unleashed. One by one the competitors swayed or minced along the catwalk. Miss Rose Grower had another and larger and more velvety rose in the strap of her swim-suit. Lindylou Twelvetrees had a little golden locket bouncing and jiggling ahead of her. But plainly the heat of the day was getting her down. She peered anxiously at her feet as she came on to the catwalk as if to see where she was, and then fixing a wide but mirthless grin on her face she marched forward.

Only, just in the middle of the judges’ table, to miss her footing and teeter perilously from the edge.

‘Ooops,’ she squeaked.

There was a roar of laughter. Lindylou managed to regain her balance. She turned and hurried back to the comforting embraces of her fellow contestants linking arms happily under the pink heart.

June, coming next again, was in top form. She refused to allow the incident in any way to perturb her. The laughter died away. A steady swell of applause replaced it.

‘Look,’ said Jack, ‘they’re clapping all over the hall. That’s what’ll make the judges pick her. She’ll do it. She’ll really do it.’

The last of the girls slipped into place on the stage.

Mr Brown, caught and held by the spotlights, walked solemnly over to the judges’ table.

He conferred.

He walked back to the stage.

There was a thrilled hush.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ Mr Brown said, ‘the judges wish to view three of the competitors again. They would like to see them in evening dress.’

An excited buzz greeted this.

‘The old devil,’ said Jack, ‘he’ll have put them up to it. It’s an old trick to spin things out. June must have won by now.’

‘Good gracious,’ said Ironside. ‘What duplicity.’

The buzz died away. Mr Brown, with colossal pauses to take breath, announced the names of the three finalists. They were June, the girl who believed in ‘Charm and be natural’ and, surprisingly so it seemed, Lindylou Twelvetrees.

‘Ah,’ said Jack, ‘I wondered if that accident business on the catwalk was a trick. She’s cleverer than she looks, that one.’

‘All the same,’ said Peter, ‘she won’t really stand a chance against June. She can’t.’

‘Do you know,’ Ironside said, ‘I think this might be an excellent moment to put our questions to that lady.’

13

Jack's face fell as if a birthday cake had been snatched away before his eyes. Peter, though perhaps less involved, looked almost as brutally robbed.

He spoke before Jack could say anything he would regret.

'Look, sir, isn't that a bit hard?' he said. 'The poor girl will be in a hell of a state wondering what the judges will decide.'

'Yes,' said Superintendent Ironside, 'she must be in a hell of a state. Bring her round to Pariss's office, will you? And don't let her linger about.'

It was an order. An unmistakable order.

'Yes, sir,' Peter said.

He hurried on ahead of the superintendent down the narrow passage beside the stage and round to the girls' dressing-room. He knocked on the door.

One of the unsuccessful contestants poked her head round. Peter told her he wanted June urgently.

'Oh, her,' said the girl. 'I don't suppose Miss Snooty will speak to you.'

But she was wrong. June, wearing a flowered quilted nylon housecoat, came to the door.

‘Superintendent Ironside would like to see you at once,’ Peter said.

June’s eyes, inside the ornate layers of make-up, hardened.

‘I can’t see him now,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Peter stubbornly. ‘But he insists.’

‘Look, we’ll be called on again before very long.’

‘The super knows all about that.’

He waited staring at the door-post beside her, saying nothing.

‘Oh, all right.’

June swept out and Peter led her quickly round the corner and along to the office where, only that morning, Teddy Pariss, uncrowned king of the beauty queens, had had someone stick a knife right into his back.

‘Good evening, Miss Curtis,’ Ironside said bleakly.

He was sitting in Teddy Pariss’s stuffed chair and with a curt jerk of his head indicated the hard chair on the other side of the desk for June.

She did not sit down.

‘What do you want?’ she said. ‘This is a bad time for me.’

‘This is a bad time for us, Miss Curtis. Sit down, please.’

June lowered herself on to the battered kitchen chair.

‘Well?’ she said.

‘Will you tell me once more what happened the last time you saw Mr Pariss alive?’ Ironside said.

A frown of annoyance broke the smooth sheen of foundation cream and powder on June’s forehead.

‘Look, I told you. This is a tricky moment for me. If you’ve got nothing better to do than ask questions I’ve already answered, you can ask them later.’

She began to get up.

‘If I thought you were telling the truth this afternoon I wouldn’t bother you now,’ Ironside said.

June stopped getting up.

Ironside waited.

But not for long.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘let’s have the truth now and we’ll be done with it.’

For an instant it looked as if he was going to break June then and there. But her full mouth hardened almost before that instant was out.

‘You’ve had the truth,’ she said. ‘What more do you want?’

‘Very well,’ Ironside barked. ‘If you won’t tell me without fuss, then we’ll have fuss. And fuss in plenty. Now, what happened when you saw Pariss?’

‘I’ve told you.’

‘Then you can tell me again.’

‘I won’t stand for this. You can’t do it to me.’

‘You haven’t stood for anything yet, Miss Curtis. I’m investigating a murder, let me remind you. And I mean to find out what I want to know. Whether you like it or not. Now, let’s hear it.’

‘I’ve said it once, I can only say it again.’

‘Or you can tell us what really happened.’

‘Nothing really happened.’

‘No, exactly. Nothing happened the way you told it to me this afternoon.’

‘Don’t try to trick me. I told you the truth this afternoon.’

‘You told me a lot of interesting things, but you didn’t tell me what really happened.’

‘Oh, yes, I did.’

‘Did you, indeed? You told me you came in here, to begin with. Wasn’t that lie number one?’

‘Lie? What do you mean lie?’

June took a long, deep breath.

‘Are you accusing me of lying, Superintendent?’ she said.

‘Because if so, you can bloody well take it back.’

Superintendent Ironside leant forward across the little desk. He joined his craggy hands in front of him.

‘Now, look,’ he said, ‘there’s no need for all this. I’m a policeman, an old policeman. I’m on the edge of retirement. Believe me, I’ve been told lies before. I don’t get worried about it. But it makes things so complicated.’

His voice sank to a cajoling wheedle.

‘Wouldn’t it be much easier if you simply told me the truth? Straight away? Without any standing up and swearing this and swearing that? It’ll be easy for you and easy for me.’

June’s piled crown of dark red hair drooped a little.

‘I told you the truth,’ she said.

‘Ah, no, now. You told me what you thought would be easiest. I don’t blame you, mind. We all do it. But, you know, in the end, it’s simpler and easier all round just to say exactly what took place. It leaves no untidy ends. It makes everything much pleasanter.’

June looked at him. A slightly doubtful pout behind the heavy lipstick.

‘Look,’ Ironside said, ‘you did your best, of course. But you happened to be talking to an old codger who’s heard so many lies told he can spot ‘em coming a mile off. Now, don’t let’s pretend anything different. Let’s have everything open and above board between us. You just quietly sit there and tell me all about it.’

June sat. But she did not talk. There was a long time when it looked as if at any instant she was going to, but in the end she shook her head slightly and seemed to come to a decision.

‘Couldn’t I go back and get changed?’ she said. ‘Though, heaven knows, I’m not going to look my best after this.’

Ironside swung back in his chair.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I’m afraid you won’t look your best. It’d be strange if you did. With all that must be going on in that lovely head of yours. All the lies you’ve got to check one against the other all the time. All the things you mustn’t let out. The secret you’ve got to keep, though everybody expects you to be smiling and beautiful. Oh, no, it would be very strange, indeed, if you were able to concentrate on looking lovely just now, Miss Curtis.’

And it was enough after all. Like an oyster neatly prised from its shell, June came out with it.

‘Oh, all right,’ she said. ‘I suppose I’d have told you sooner or later. It isn’t really so very much, you know. I didn’t murder Teddy Pariss, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

The rigid figure of Detective-Constable Spratt almost slumped where it stood.

Superintendent Ironside allowed his left eyebrow to rise just a fraction.

‘It was damned silly, really,’ June said. ‘And I didn’t even have to do it.’

She sat up straighter and looked the superintendent full in the face.

‘I didn’t go into Teddy at all,’ she said. ‘I crept out into the yard there, sneaked along to the window of the rest room, scrambled through and put a packet of sleeping pills in the tea-urn. I thought if those little bitches were so sleepy they didn’t know which way to turn, I’d be certain of pulling off the contest.’

‘Dear me,’ said Ironside.

He pulled a long face.

‘And just as you were coming in again,’ he asked, ‘you heard Bert Mullens clumping round the corner?’

June nodded.

‘I grabbed hold of the handle of Teddy’s door,’ she said, ‘and pretended I’d just come out. I was scared that old fool Bert would insist on having a long, maundering conversation and Teddy would come out. Poor devil, I suppose he was dead then.’

Ironside rose from his chair.

‘Well, now,’ he said, ‘they’re always telling me that confession has a relieving effect. Let’s hope so. The very best of luck to you with the judges.’

June turned and left in a hurry. She did appear to be more cheerful.

‘Well,’ said the superintendent, ‘this almost certainly accounts for that distressing business with our friend Mullens. No doubt he helped himself liberally to the tea when the girls didn’t get it. It’s pleasant to have one thing cleared up at least.’

‘Silly kid,’ Jack said. ‘Why did she want to do a thing like that?’

‘But this makes a difference,’ said Peter. ‘If Teddy Pariss was killed earlier than we thought, Daisy Stitchford hasn’t got an alibi after all. She may have been being watched by all those people at the time we thought the murder was done, but now it could have happened round about those two or three minutes she slipped out.’

‘And listen, me old beaut,’ Jack added, ‘this makes it more likely for Lindylou, too. Gives her more time.’

‘Ah, what eager beavers indeed,’ said Ironside. ‘And tell me, Lassington, which of these two charming suspects would you prefer?’

‘Prefer, sir?’

Peter looked at him in frank disbelief.

Ironside smiled enigmatically as ever.

‘Luckily,’ he said in his annoyingly quiet voice, ‘we don’t have to make a choice. It may be, you know, that our naked little friend wasn’t in the judges’ room long enough.’

Jack’s eyes gleamed.

‘I don’t reckon we found that out from the girls, right enough,’ he said. ‘We ought to have another go at ‘em.’

‘A pastime which I think you will not find wholly distasteful,’ said Ironside.

Jack grinned.

‘No, sir.’

‘Yet look out. Remember, we’ll be dealing not with young hopefuls now, but with young disappointeds.’

‘You could be right, sir,’ Jack said.

‘Nevertheless we must do our duty.’

So while June Curtis fought it out once more in front of the judges Jack, Peter and the superintendent invaded the girls’ dressing-room again and put them through another long bout of questioning. And the superintendent proved to be right. No longer was gay information about the world of beauty contests forthcoming. All was sullenness and sulks.

‘That June don’t stand a chance,’ one rejected aspirant confided to Peter. ‘Her sort’s on the way out. A few years ago, mind, it was different. I grant you that. But now they don’t want that voluptuous type. They like ‘em sort of cheeky.’

‘You don’t think a cheeky little thing like that Lindylou’s got a hope, do you?’ another failed beauty asked Ironside.

‘My dear, I’m a child in these matters.’

‘No. Not a hope. It’s all very well being clever and thinking you can make the judges take a bit of notice of you. Well, of course they do. They’re men, aren’t they? But in the end they won’t dare to give it her. You’ll see.’

‘I shall be more than interested. But what I was asking was whether you know how long she was away in the judges’ room at

lunch-time.'

'And she's stupid with it Well, I ask you, wasn't going in there a stupid thing to do?'

'No doubt. But. . .'

And once more patience was rewarded. As is not always the case.

When the three of them came to compare notes it was evident that Lindylou had in fact been away in the judges' room a good deal longer than was necessary considering that the judges had not been there.

As they stood in the corridor outside the dressing-room finishing their discussion June came suddenly out of the double doors leading from the stage.

'Is it over?' Jack asked excitedly. 'Did you get it?'

June's beautiful mouth tautened in an expression which could only be called unbeautiful.

'He's done it again,' she said. 'Got the damned judges to spend heaven knows how long making up their minds. We're all to go back on stage in quarter of an hour. It makes me sick. Just because he wants to sell more of his bleeding drinks.'

'And the other young ladies?' asked Ironside.

His sombre eyes were flicking up and down the corridor.

'Went down front,' June said. 'Don't know why. Meant to be not allowed.'

‘Excuse me,’ said Ironside with sudden abruptness.

He pushed past June and set off with long strides towards the pass-door. Peter followed. Jack stopped only to give June an encouraging squeeze round the waist.

As soon as they got into the ballroom they spotted the third finalist, the charm merchant. She was being dragged, discreetly, away from a cluster of young men by the hard-smiling Mr Brown.

But of Lindylou Twelvetrees there was no sign.

In the packed and happy throng of the ballroom they searched for Lindylou everywhere. They asked questions, remembering to be discreet however tempting it was to shout and hector. They got few answers. People had not come to the Star Bowl to be bothered by questions, however discreet, however insistent. They had come to pit their judgement against the judges' in the great Miss Valentine contest and that was occupation enough for anybody.

Ironside even enlisted the help of the band of reporters still waiting for crumbs to fall. But at last the truth could no longer be shirked. Lindylou had left. She had disappeared into the cold, wet, dark and pitiless night.

Ironside, his craggy face bleak, admitted defeat and made for a telephone. He set the routine in motion. But it was plain from his manner that he did not expect it to be particularly successful.

'Do you reckon she's got clear away then, sir?' asked Peter.

Ironside smiled slightly.

'Nothing so dramatic, I'm afraid, my good chap. She'll be picked up sooner or later. But it is a dreadful nuisance, there's no gainsaying that.'

When Mr Brown, the weight of the late Teddy Pariss's legacy heavy on his shoulders, discovered that Lindylou was no longer with them he took it by no means as philosophically as Ironside.

Unfortunately in the excitement of the moment he had omitted to make sure she was ready to come on stage before the judges' verdict was solemnly announced. And the judges, perverse beings that they were, had happened to pick Lindylou as the ultimate winner, Miss Valentine herself.

June Curtis, chosen runner-up and maid-of-honour, had stepped through the blue drapes to take her place at the right-hand side of the throne under the throbbing pink heart. There was a hush of pure expectancy. Lindylou's name had rolled out. And nothing had happened. No wide-eyed, cheeky figure had come bouncing through the curtains.

Naturally, quick as lightning, Mr Brown had made a joke. It had been well received. The orchestra had done its best with a second crashing set of chords. But still the curtains had remained obstinately closed.

'Then I'll have to go and drag her on,' Mr Brown quipped.

The audience applauded this admirable intention with gusto. But not all the good will in the world could produce Lindylou. The cold, wet, dark night saw to that.

And so there had been a rather hurried announcement about a slight indisposition and it was widely agreed that the Miss Valentine Night had not ended quite as well as it might have done.

Both Jack and Peter were depressed and on edge as they made their way once more back to the little office in which Teddy Pariss

wearing an exuberant suit of Prince of Wales check had breathed his last. Even Superintendent Ironside seemed more sombre as he led the way in.

The usually equable Jack was positively bad-tempered, a regrettable failing in a policeman.

‘And it’s bloody perishing cold,’ he snarled, really snarled, marching up to the double doors to the yard through which the rain-laden icy wind was energetically whistling.

He brought the two doors together with an almighty crash.

The superintendent turned on his heel as if the noise had been the last straw to tautened nerves.

‘Open them up again, there’s a good fellow,’ he said.

Jack looked at him.

But the superintendent’s face was set in an expression of resigned bitterness. It was plainly not a time to try him.

Jack pushed the doors open.

Without a word Ironside walked out into the long, high-walled yard. Peter and Jack looked at him.

Outside the night was stonily appalling. Though the yard was faintly lit by the street lights over the tall, glass-topped walls, the steady battering of the insistent rain made it almost impossible to make out a thing. They saw the superintendent hunch his shoulders and look all round him. Then he squelched off determinedly in the

direction of the lean-to shed formed by the end of the yard nearest them. For a few moments he peered at the shed like an angry schoolmaster confronting a blotted copybook. Then he apparently located the door and after rattling it bad-temperedly got it to open.

‘Damn,’ they heard him say in the chilly dark.

There was a pause. Only the steady, truculent sluicing of the rain could be heard. Then came the superintendent’s voice again.

‘All right. You moved. I heard you. Come on out.’

Peter and Jack looked at each other. Neither of them had ever before had to deal with a superior officer suffering from delusions.

‘Come on out, damn you,’ Ironside said loudly. ‘Come into the warm light where I can make a bit of sense of things.’

Jack was grinning again now. But in perplexity.

Suddenly two figures appeared at the door of the shed. The superintendent and Lindylou Twelvetrees. They walked sloshily through the rain and came in, Lindylou clutching the long skirt of her evening dress up round her knees.

The superintendent held the door of Pariss’s office open for her. They all went in. Ironside bent and switched on the Wurlitzer electric fire.

‘We’ve still got to sort this thing out,’ he said. ‘But in the meantime we may as well get some comfort out of it.’

True enough, within a couple of minutes the great waves of heat from the fire had transformed the little room into a slightly oppressive snugger.

Ironside turned to the distinctly sulky-looking figure of Lindylou.

‘I’m afraid Mr Brown is not going to be pleased with you,’ he said.

He sounded decidedly stern.

But unexpectedly his words seemed to have exactly the opposite effect than might have been expected. Instead of being chastened, Lindylou sat up in the battered kitchen chair on which she had subsided.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ she said.

Ironside was undisconcerted.

‘Now that’s a thoroughly unhelpful way of addressing someone as ancient as I am,’ he replied.

Lindylou pouted.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘if you say something stupid, what do you expect?’

‘You could point out to me, as gently as possible, just why you think I’m being so – so unintelligent.’

She gave him the pitying look people see themselves reserving for lunatics.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I skip out of the way because of what I done to blasted Mr Brown, and then when you come along and drag me out all you can think of to say is “Mr Brown won’t be pleased with you.” What did you think he’d be? Delighted?’

‘Never mind what I think,’ Ironside snapped suddenly. ‘It’s what Mr Brown’s going to think that should be worrying you. And what you’re going to do about it.’

The transparent bluff worked. After all, Lindylou was chiefly remarkable for lack of reasoning powers.

She began now to sob.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ she wailed. ‘If I’d known all the trouble it’d be, I wouldn’t have done it.’

She groaned heart-rendingly.

Superintendent Ironside’s heart showed few signs of being rended. He waited grimly.

‘Well,’ Lindylou went on, ‘I didn’t know I would ever really get into the finals. I mean, I might turn out to be the winner. And then what ever would I do?’

Ironside was quick.

‘You’d better think fast, my girl,’ he said. ‘You did win, and mighty bad it looked when you weren’t there to sit yourself on that great big golden throne.’

Lindylou stopped sobbing.

‘I did win?’ she said. ‘Really?’

She began to giggle, stopped suddenly and burst into new floods of tears.

The superintendent watched them flow. When he judged the time ripe he came and sat on the edge of the little desk near Lindylou.

‘You’d better tell me about it,’ he said.

Through her sobs Lindylou told.

‘It was that foam rubber,’ she said. ‘I happened to have a bit, in the lining of my vanity case. To give it a sort of puffed out look, you know. And when they were all so horrid to me I thought I’d show ‘em. I’ll do better than you think I will, I thought.’

‘And so you used the rubber?’ Ironside said painstakingly.

‘Yes. I cut it in two and got it ever so nicely arranged down the front of my swim-suit.’

Her face fell again.

‘I done it too well,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ said Ironside, ‘you overdid things.’

‘I kept it there when the judges were looking at just the three of us,’ Lindylou went on. ‘And I was sure they’d spotted it. I thought that was why they said they wanted more time: to discuss about what to do with me.’

A huge sob.

‘So I run off. First of all down on to the dance floor and then back again. And at last I hid in there.’

‘You’re a great one for hiding, aren’t you?’ Ironside said.

‘What do you mean?’

Lindylou’s tear-stained face jerked round to look up at him. Suspiciously, with plain hostility.

‘This afternoon, at lunch-time,’ Ironside said.

Lindylou looked at him.

‘In the judges’ room?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he said implacably.

‘Oh, well, yes. I suppose in a way it was hiding. I didn’t think you’d realize I was in there so long. None of the girls did, thank goodness. It would’ve been rather awkward to explain.’

Once more Ironside waited.

‘I mean, it was silly,’ Lindylou said.

Ironside looked down at her gravely.

‘Well,’ Lindylou said, ‘I hadn’t never seen a mirror as big as that one in there. Not where I could be private.’

‘You’ve nothing like it at home?’ Ironside said cautiously.

‘No. Just a little scrap of glass on the mantelshelf. So when I got the chance to see the whole of myself. . .’

She looked down at her neat little toes.

‘The whole of myself, like that,’ she said. ‘Well, I couldn’t resist it.’

She turned her face up to Ironside again. It looked perky.

‘You’d better go home,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell Mr Brown he’ll have to find himself a new winner. And I suppose I’d better tell those blasted newspapers. Otherwise you’ll find yourself on the wrong end of a manhunt in the morning.’

‘Well, thanks ever so,’ Lindylou said.

Even a partial spectator would have had to admit that the gratitude was casual.

She ran on tap-tapping high heels along the corridor, her big skirt billowing up. They heard her wrestle with the bar of the stage door and then open it.

‘Who’s there?’ called a sharp voice.

‘That’s Daisy Stitchford,’ Ironside said. ‘Lassington, nip out and bring her in here. I’d rather like a word with her.’

Peter did as he was told. In spite of Daisy’s reluctance.

‘It’s all very well, Superintendent,’ she said as Peter ushered her in, ‘but it’s extremely late at night.’

‘I’m sorry to have to keep you,’ Ironside replied, ‘but I feel that you would like me to let you know I unintentionally misled you this afternoon.’

‘Misled?’

Through her polished little spectacles Daisy Stitchford, once mistress of the late Teddy Pariss, glanced sharply at the superintendent.

‘On the question of time,’ Ironside said. ‘I let you believe Mr Pariss was alive at twenty-five past one. I now find this wasn’t necessarily true.’

‘It’s kind of you to tell me, Mr Ironside,’ Daisy said tartly. ‘But I can’t see that it much concerns me. I understand from Mullens that he heard someone talking to Mr Pariss at quarter past one. It was quite that when I left the ballroom.’

She turned primly on her heel and began to walk out.

‘No,’ said Ironside.

She stopped and cocked her head on one side to listen to what he had got to say. However ridiculous.

‘To begin with,’ Ironside went on, ‘our information is that you left the ballroom at one-fifteen and not afterwards. And in any case I think you’ll find Teddy Pariss was dead long before Mullens heard him talking at quarter past.’

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Peter and Jack stood with gaping mouths. No doubt alert members of the Metropolitan Police should not allow themselves to be seen so obviously and blatantly surprised. But then, on the whole, members of that force do not expect to have their superior officers take the ground from under their feet.

Jack recovered first.

‘Look, sir,’ he said, ‘Mullens –’

Ironside whipped round.

‘Oh, Spratt,’ he said. ‘And I might have been telling a lie for some special and devious purpose.’

‘But you weren’t, sir,’ said Jack, reddening.

‘Well, no, I wasn’t.’

‘Then what do you mean, sir? If I may ask,’ Peter said.

He looked as put out, or more so, than Jack.

‘But the oldest trick in the book,’ Ironside said. ‘The big, fat tape-recorder. That was what Mullens heard. His late employer’s resonant tones coming out of that. No doubt dictating something. That was why he thought you were in here, Miss Stitchford. Put it on and we’ll see.’

Jack went over to the tape-recorder. It was necessary to unplug the big fire to get it to go but eventually Teddy Pariss’s familiar,

aggressive voice came bouncing out.

‘The main aim of my contests is dignity. This is what we put first. A real dignity. We want to make beauty contests as dignified and gracious as a royal occasion.’

‘You see,’ said Ironside gently, ‘there had to be some explanation for that fire being off. And when you come to think of it, it’s quite simple: someone used the time-plug from the fire for the tape-recorder. To confuse the issue. A deplorably silly trick. Bound to come out, you know.’

He looked round at them all severely.

‘And why are you telling me all this?’

It was Daisy Stitchford, sharp as an asp.

‘I felt I owed it to you,’ Ironside said.

‘It’s because you think I killed him, isn’t it? Well, answer me this. Why should I have killed him today? If I’d wanted to have killed him, I could have killed him years ago.’

‘Except for one thing,’ Peter Lassington said.

All eyes turned to him.

He swallowed.

‘Except that it happened to be today that Teddy Pariss’s old friend Fay Curtis took her life,’ he said. ‘Quite what it was she knew about you I can’t guess. But it must have been enough to stop you doing what you’d wanted to do for a very –’

‘Constable, Constable.’

Superintendent Ironside sounded shocked.

‘We haven’t cautioned this lady,’ he said. ‘You shouldn’t really go making allegations like that unless you’re prepared to tell her you have reason to believe she killed Pariss.’

He wagged his head from side to side.

‘And, you know,’ he said, ‘I don’t think we really do believe that. Not with all the conflicting evidence we’ve had so far.’

Peter blushed a deep pink.

‘Well,’ said Daisy Stitchford, ‘I shall remember this. It’s not only disgraceful, it’s entirely untrue. I don’t even know this person you talked about.’

Peter said no more.

Daisy looked round the little room in which her late employer, and former lover, had met his untimely end. Ironside, standing by the little desk with its overloaded array of luxury furnishings, looked back at her with mild interest. Jack, beside Peter near the door, pretended to be very busy examining the pattern of the cover on the late Mr Pariss’s well-sprung divan. Peter dropped his gaze and stared stonily at his shoes, which were notably pointed-toed for a policeman’s. The huge, flashy electric fire, slowly cooling after being unplugged, emitted every now and again a series of little ticking sounds, unaware of the part it had played in the drama, or so it seemed.

‘Then I’ll go,’ said Daisy. ‘Unless you’ve anything else you want to tell me.’

‘No, I don’t think there’s anything at the moment,’ Ironside said. ‘Perhaps there’ll be something tomorrow, though. Where shall we be able to find you?’

Daisy looked at him piercingly through the glitter of her spectacles.

‘I shall be here,’ she said. ‘There’s a great deal of clearing up to be done.’

She gave them one last severe look and left.

‘I’m very sorry, sir,’ Peter said. ‘I’m afraid I got carried away.’

‘I should hope you are sorry,’ said the superintendent. ‘You’ll take care to leave the direction of an interview to me in future.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Not that your point wasn’t worth making. Daisy Stitchford must have been about in Teddy Pariss’s unregenerate days when he had that unpleasant mob at his command and all that. And it’s from that period that Fay Curtis dates. So you’re well within your rights in drawing that conclusion.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘But next time make some allowance for my subtlety, please. I might have got there myself.’

Peter looked even more abashed.

‘And now,’ Ironside said, ‘I think you two youngsters had better go off and get a bit of sleep. There’s not much more to be done tonight. I’ll see you here tomorrow at seven-thirty sharp.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Peter and Jack marched smartly out of the little office and went out to the dutifully wet and chill night. For a few minutes they stood at the stage door, talking about the events of the day, before plunging under the healthily cold douche of the rain.

It was some time during the night that the rain decided that it could effect an honourable withdrawal. So it was through early morning streets still cold enough but quite dry that Peter Lassington made his way the short distance between his flat and the Star Bowl ballroom. Scarcely anybody was about. A cat, its fur fluffed up against the chill, hurried back from some assignation with its tail held complacently upright.

The restaurants – where the evening before smooth young executives had glided through the ritual of dinner with gorgeous, scrumptious, vanilla-and-strawberry ice-cream debs – were now silent, shuttered, weary and inhospitable. In front of each stood two or three dustbins, lids awry, gorged with the leavings. In the packed window of an electrical goods shop fires stood shoulder to shoulder, tinny and cold, and a couple of television sets glared with single, dull, sightless eyes at the empty street in front of them.

Yet the street itself as the light of day began to break was unexpectedly cheerful. The weather, whose freakishness is the prop and stay of the awesome British character, had become wildly irresponsible. The sky was blue, getting darker and darker every moment as a hopelessly gay sun climbed up. Puffs of white cloud scurried about with plainly not the least notion of the significance of their behaviour.

Peter walked quickly through it all, and it was before twenty-five past seven when he entered the little office at the Star Bowl. But Ironside was already at work. The newspapers with their happily shouting headlines about 'Death Comes To Beauty King' and 'Girlie Knife Kills Man Who Made Girlies Queens' were lying in a heap on the floor beside him. On the desk was a well-filled note-book in which he was marking curious little symbols against certain items.

'Ah, good morning, Lassington,' he said. 'Eager to know what's going on, I see.'

Peter looked at him with a suspicion which a night in bed had increased rather than dispelled.

'Well, yes, sir,' he said, 'I am keen to know where we are.'

'Then suppose you tell me.'

Ironside looked up from his note-book and smiled.

'Me, sir? Tell you?'

'Yes, that's right. I'll just finish this, but I'll be listening.'

His grey head plunged down again and he drew a small circle with a dot in it against a short item in his note-book.

Peter licked his lips.

‘Well, as I see it, sir,’ he said, ‘the case against Daisy Stitchford is still pretty good. I know I made a fool of myself last night, but the fact remains she knew Teddy Pariss at the time old Fay Curtis did. And, the moment Fay’s dead, Teddy gets killed. And then there’s the letter. It was here at one stage. I’ll swear that. But we know it’s gone now, don’t we, sir?’

The question was asked on a note of desperation. Ironside looked up at last.

‘Oh, yes,’ he said, ‘we know that. But go on. And don’t mind me.’

He returned to his note-book, reading through several pages of neatly written comments without making any marks.

‘Or there’s Bert Mullens,’ Peter said. ‘It would have been quite easy for him to slip along here. He could practically choose his moment. And we certainly caught him out trying to eavesdrop on us.’

‘Yes,’ said Ironside without looking up, ‘we certainly caught him out.’

He put no particular emphasis on the ‘we’. But Peter felt obliged to acknowledge a slight deviation from the truth.

‘When I say “we”, sir, I mean you really. I mean, I hadn’t actually any idea he was at the door like that.’

‘He’s got dreadfully heavy breathing, poor fellow,’ said Ironside.

As if reminded of something, he riffled back through his notebook, put a cross with a dot in each angle against a brief item and then turned to the untouched pages at the back and added a new note.

‘I don’t know so much about “poor fellow”, sir,’ said Peter. ‘If you ask me, anyone who’s so very interested in what the police are saying is pretty shady on the face of it.’

Ironside laid down his pencil.

‘Exactly so,’ he said. ‘And as a matter of fact some poor unfortunate at the Yard has been busy in the night checking on his prints. We may hear something before long.’

He looked at Peter with mild interest.

‘Any other points that have struck you?’ he asked.

‘Well, yes, sir. There are other things. I mean, we shouldn’t forget June Curtis or Lindylou, sir. Should we? It’s all very well that tale that Lindylou spun us last night. But the fact remains she was probably in the room next door when Pariss was killed. There’d be nothing to prevent her slipping along here. And I’ll tell you what I think might have happened.’

‘Do that,’ murmured Ironside.

But his words were disgracefully inaudible.

‘Well, sir, I see it like this. She’d have done more or less anything to do well in the contest. We know that. Well, what was to prevent her trying it on with Teddy? And then when it came to it very likely she found him a bit more than she’d bargained for. After all, she is only a child really.’

‘Yes,’ Ironside agreed, ‘she is only a child, Lassington.’

‘And it’s much the same with June Curtis, sir,’ Peter went on. ‘I can say this better now Spratt isn’t here. She told us all about that tea-urn, but it could have been only a cover-up. She could really have come in here afterwards.’

Ironside appeared to be less impressed than he might have been. He looked at his watch.

‘Spratt’s late,’ he said. ‘A pity. I would have liked to have heard what he’s got to say about all this.’

The phone on the late Mr Pariss’s tiny temporary desk rang eagerly.

Ironside picked it up and cautiously gave the number.

‘Ah, it’s you,’ he said.

He put his hand over the mouthpiece’

‘Fingerprints. Mullens.’

He listened to a rapid, chattering buzz on the far end.

‘Thank you,’ he said at last. ‘You’ve done perfectly splendidly.’

The person at the other end abruptly rang off.

‘Well, now,’ said Ironside, unperturbed, ‘here’s some interesting news. Our friend Mullens isn’t our friend Mullens at all.’

Peter’s eyes brightened.

‘Yes,’ the superintendent went on, ‘he’s our friend Hake, it appears. Our friend Charles Hake. My own Christian name, I’m sorry to say, because the fellow has a nasty little record for blackmailing. A fearfully unpleasant crime. You know, I think we shall have to have a serious talk with him.’

His head plunged down into the note-book again and for a while he wrote industriously. Then he put down the pencil and sat in silence.

Peter cleared his throat.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ he said, ‘but was I on the right track at all in what I was saying?’

Ironside looked up.

‘No,’ he said. ‘You’ve gone right off the track, I think.’

‘Sir?’

‘I believe I referred to it before,’ Ironside said. ‘The right order in tackling a case. If this was a matter of breaking and entering you wouldn’t go speculating about what people had in their minds. You’d simply find out who was about at the time in question.’

Peter thought this over.

The telephone rang again.

Ironside pointed to it silently and Peter took up the receiver.

It was Sheila Spratt, Jack's wife. She sounded agitated. Jack had not been home all night. The station knew nothing about him. As far as they were concerned he had been seconded to Ironside.

'I'll see what I can do,' Peter said cautiously. 'I'll ring you back.'

'Who was that?' Ironside asked.

Peter paused for thought.

'Well,' said Ironside with a trace of bark, 'who was it?'

'Mrs Spratt, sir. Spratt hasn't been home all night. They know nothing about him at the station.'

Peter looked round the little room.

'Looks as though he's gone missing, sir.'

16

Superintendent Ironside looked sombrely at Peter. The fact of Jack's disappearance seemed to sadden him.

But no more.

'You're quite certain of this?' he asked.

'I'm afraid so, sir,' Peter said.

He stood looking down at the thick red carpet without a word.

But he was unable to keep silent long.

'Sir,' he said, with an effort to stay calm, 'do you think this is why Jack was so handy when Inspector Hammersby first came round to the case. I thought it was just because he'd been hanging round hoping to see June. But could it have been for something worse?'

'You know,' Ironside answered in a voice so low that Peter had to lean right over him to hear at all, 'I could have wished my last murder investigation had been something simple. A man quarrelling with his wife and bashing her in the face with the poker. That's what I'd have liked.'

He sighed.

'You'd better get on to your Inspector Hammersby,' he said. 'Get him to put the machinery in action. That must be done.'

Peter picked up the telephone. His conversation with Inspector Hammersby was not easy. After all, even a man not obsessed by

doubts of his own efficiency could quite reasonably be put out to learn that one of his promoted subordinates had done something as foolish as Detective-Constable Spratt appeared to have done.

But at last Peter was able to put down the receiver with honour.

‘So,’ said Ironside, ‘your friend Jack told me something about himself yesterday, the touching story of your rivalry, the way you both improved your minds and sought out bad company in a good cause. But you’d better tell me how you see him. And especially just what he was up to with Miss Curtis.’

Peter considered for a moment.

‘You know, sir,’ he said, ‘it’s surprising how little I can tell you about that. You’ve heard Jack talk. He makes no bones about saying she’s a smasher and all that. And they’re obviously friendly. But, honestly, I don’t know much more than that.’

‘Honestly, Constable?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘How pleasant to find someone speaking honestly,’ Ironside mused almost to himself.

Peter stood looking down at him. He was enough to provoke wonder in someone even little inclined to that exercise.

But, not unexpectedly, the superintendent abruptly looked up.

‘You and he gave the impression of still being pretty close,’ he said. ‘You had a way of communicating to each other your

impressions of myself by way of little winks and whatnot.'

Police constables seldom blush, by and large. But not for the first time in his dealings with the superintendent Peter Lassington was unable to prevent a deep pinkness flooding up from under his collar.

'I'm sorry if we were disrespectful –'

I'm not interested in that. I want to know just how well you knew Spratt.'

'Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.'

He bit his bottom lip.

'Well, sir, as you know, we were friends before we joined the force, right from when we were at school as a matter of fact. Jack joined a bit before me and I suppose it was because of him that I decided to make a career of the police.'

'Go on.'

'Well, sir, Jack's been with the C.I.D. about a year now, and we've drifted apart in a way. I see less of him – what with his time at detective school and all that.'

'This rivalry between the two of you. Was it a friendly rivalry?'

'Oh, yes, sir. Absolutely friendly. Though, to tell the truth, I've always reckoned I was a bit brighter than Jack, and I was a bit piqued to see him getting on so well in the C.I.D.'

'I see. Now tell me about Spratt's wife.'

‘Yes, sir. Well, they’ve been married much about the same time as we have, though they’ve got a couple of kids. Actually, sir, I think the first one was on the way when they got married.’

‘Think?’

‘Well, it was, sir. Jack told me about it.’

Ironside sighed.

‘Try, Constable,’ he said, ‘to be absolutely accurate in your answers.’

‘Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.’

‘Now, what did Spratt say to you about going off like this?’

Peter took a deep breath.

‘Nothing, sir. Absolutely nothing.’

‘Think again, please.’

‘No, really, sir. It’s been as much of a surprise to me as it has to anyone.’

‘Hm.’

Ironside sat pondering in the well-padded desk chair which had once supported the late Teddy Pariss in his many difficult enterprises. When he spoke again it was on quite a new track. Butterflies flit from flower to flower; but they do it to gather food.

‘Do you now say that the telephone call you received warning you that a break-in was going on here was made by Spratt?’ he asked.

Peter considered.

‘I can’t be sure, sir,’ he declared at last.

‘Perhaps you will become surer as time passes.’

A faint layer of perspiration gleamed suddenly on Peter’s pink and white face.

‘Look, sir,’ he said, ‘if Jack did make that call, it could be like this. He could have had a row with Pariss and ended up by somehow sticking that knife in him. But, say, he isn’t sure whether Pariss is dead. So he rings me up and gets me round here, knowing I’ll see to things if there’s any hope.’

‘So you think after all it was Spratt who made the call?’

Again Peter thought.

‘I can’t really say, sir.’

‘A pity. It’s got to be accounted for, you know.’

‘I expect it’ll be plain when things get sorted out in the end, sir.’

‘You expect that, do you?’

Once more Peter thought it best not to answer directly.

‘I know you don’t much care for talk about why people did things, sir,’ he said. ‘But a bloke can’t help wondering.’

‘And you’re wondering about Spratt?’

‘What I mean is this, sir: June Curtis’s mother takes her own life and before doing so she writes to her old friend Teddy Pariss. We

don't know what was in that letter, but it's more than likely it had something to do with June. June was practically all old Fay was leaving behind in this world. All right, Jack's fond of June, and she wants to get the letter back. Teddy wants to keep it. He was nasty enough for anything. So Jack asks for it and Teddy refuses. That could be the cause of the row. It all hangs together.'

'You know,' Ironside said, 'I think the first thing is to question young Spratt and find out exactly where he was at the time of the murder.'

Peter looked at him suspiciously.

'Question him, sir?'

'Of course we shall have to find him first.'

Peter smiled.

'There's that detail, you're right, sir.'

Abruptly Ironside looked at him.

'You expect we'll find it pretty difficult, eh?'

'Well, sir, he's a policeman. He knows the drill. It gives him a head start, at the least.'

'So you see young Spratt getting clear away?'

'To be perfectly honest, I do, sir.'

'Ah,' said Ironside, 'perfect honesty. Let's be on our way.'

'Whereto, sir?'

‘Can’t you guess?’

‘To be perf – No, sir. I can’t guess.’

‘Why, to see Mrs Spratt, of course. Routine, my good fellow, routine. This isn’t the end of the world, you know. It’s just an occurrence that has to be treated according to the procedure painfully arrived at. Come on.’

They went out to the car.

The journey to Jack’s flat, in Somers Town behind the grime and smoky noise of Euston Station, took some time. The morning traffic rush was at its peak and making their way up past the glossy furniture shops of Tottenham Court Road was a painfully long business. Ironside sat for the most part in deep thought. The expression on his craggy face was unrelievedly gloomy.

He looked up once when the car had been caught for at least five minutes in a jam just opposite a little cinema. He jerked his head in the direction of the big poster outside, which showed an enormous, almost completely naked girl painted in a uniform but lively pink.

‘I suppose that’s what they call an art film,’ he said sourly.

‘Bit of all right to me, art or no art,’ Peter replied, valiantly attempting to inject a note of cheerfulness.

Ironside did not take him up.

Instead he gave him an embarrassingly long and searching look, and then grunted once and relapsed into his deep melancholy.

Jack's home was in a big, new, ugly block of flats. They went up in a bare and empty lift, once brightly painted, now chipped and battered.

Ironside rang the doorbell.

A voice inside called out 'Just a minute.'

They waited.

After a few seconds Sheila Spratt opened the door to them. She was wearing a flowered apron and rubbing her hands against it. Her face was not made up at all and had a thin whisk of white flour running across it. This may have given it character but it deprived it of prettiness, which in happier times it could easily have attained.

'Oh, it's you,' she said when she saw Peter.

She led them into the kitchen where the flour for a cake was in a bowl on the gay-topped table.

'Do you mind if I get on with this?' she said. 'I promised it to the kids, and if I don't get it in the oven now I shan't be able to make one later.'

'Please carry on,' Ironside said soothingly. 'We'll just sit down here, if we may, and put our few questions.'

Sheila Spratt flicked open a packet of margarine, cut it decisively into blocks, dropped them into the bowl and began working them into the flour with her fingers.

She seemed struck with the incongruity of her actions in face of what they had come to talk to her about.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

She sniffed back a tear.

‘I’m sorry. It seems awful to be doing this. But I can’t put off the kids. They’d want to know why. And I don’t know what to tell them. I don’t know what’s happening.’

‘You may know more than you realize, Mrs Spratt,’ Ironside said. ‘We’re certainly very much in the dark. But we must find your husband, and anything you can do to help us will be more than important.’

‘What can I do?’ she said.

She flipped her stretched fingers against each other to tap off the clinging flour.

‘You can tell us if your husband said anything to you that gave you a hint he was going.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘No, it came as a complete shock to me.’

Her fingers seemed to be about as flour-free as shaking was likely to get them. She turned towards the sink.

‘Stop,’ said Ironside.

She stopped, turned back and looked at him in astonishment.

‘You told us he left last night,’ he said. ‘He spent the whole night away. He didn’t telephone or anything. And yet you left it till this

morning before making any inquiries. Mrs Spratt, you didn't expect your husband home last night, did you?'

Sheila Spratt smiled wryly.

'Nothing very strange about that,' she said. 'You might as well know, I suppose. Though till today I've been striving and struggling to keep it secret. There's been plenty of nights when Jack hasn't come home when he was off duty.'

Suddenly the flour clinging to her hands seemed to infuriate her. She stormed over to the sink, flicked the tap viciously full on and held her hands under the spurting stream of water. A shower of hard drops leapt from the back of her hands and spattered all over the top of her frock above the apron.

'Damn,' she said.

She walked over to the roller towel hanging on the back of the door and dabbed at herself.

'At first he used the phone to make excuses,' she said. 'But then when I accidentally caught him out once he just simply stopped making the excuses. I got used to it. I was only worried in case other people got to know.'

Peter Lassington looked at the bright harlequin squares of colour on the lino at his feet.

Sheila came back to the cake bowl and stood with her short-nailed hands resting on the table on either side of it, looking at the

grains and lumps of flour and fat as if she did not know what they were for.

‘And now it doesn’t matter,’ she said.

‘It matters to me,’ Ironside answered. ‘It matters to me where that young man is.’

‘I suppose it does,’ she said.

‘Now, can you tell me anywhere he might have gone? Is there any particular friend he might have got to help him?’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘there is.’

Ironside looked up from his neat, painted kitchen chair.

Sheila Spratt gave a bitter smile.

‘There’s Peter there,’ she said. ‘He was the best friend Jack had in the world. Almost his only real friend, I suppose. And you can see he doesn’t know. He’s gone. Gone.’

Mechanically but swiftly and efficiently she tipped sugar from the pan of her scales into the cake mixture, added a handful of chopped cherries, and poured in egg and milk from a jug.

‘I must ask you these questions,’ Ironside went on. ‘You know who I am, don’t you? I mean, more than the mere name.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Superintendent Ironside, didn’t Peter say? Are you the rubber heel squad? That’s what it’s called, isn’t it? The ones that watch the cops that go wrong. That’s what Jack used to call them.’

‘No,’ said Ironside, ‘they’re a necessary body of men. A police force has to consider its internal security. But I’m not one of them. I’m from the Yard, from the Murder Squad.’

Sheila Spratt stopped her energetic stirring of the cake mixture for an instant.

Then she went on as smoothly and efficiently as before.

‘You’re in charge of the case Jack got himself on. Is that it? The murder down at the Star Bowl ballroom.’

‘Yes,’ said Ironside, ‘that’s it. That’s just it.’

‘Yes, I suppose it must put you out a lot, having the man working under you suddenly go waltzing off.’

‘I can bear it. I lost a sergeant before the case was five minutes old. They’ll send someone else soon enough.’

‘But then why are you spending time coming out here? I don’t understand.’

Still the wooden spoon slapped the mixture mechanically against the side of the big bowl.

‘Don’t you understand?’

‘No. No, I don’t’.

Ironside sat quite still on the spry little kitchen chair. His voice did not rise.

‘I think you do.’

Suddenly Sheila Spratt started to cry. After a few seconds the tears began to fall into the bowl. They lay brightly glistening on the surface of the shiny yellow mixture.

‘Now, then,’ said Ironside, ‘tell me all about it. I’ve got to know.’

‘There’s not much to tell. But I thought I had to keep it from you somehow. I had to think of Jack. He is my husband. I don’t care what he’s done to me. We’ve been married all these years. You can’t wipe them out.’

She wiped at the tears with the back of her hand.

‘I didn’t quite tell you the whole truth just now,’ she said. ‘When I was saying about Jack not coming home at nights.’

Suddenly she snatched up the wooden spoon again and started to stir the mixture in the bowl as if her life depended on it.

She said nothing.

Superintendent Ironside leant forward and put his hands on his knees. He looked up at Sheila Spratt.

‘The whole truth,’ he said gently.

‘What?’ she replied with a quick ferocious glare.

‘The whole truth, Mrs Spratt. You said you hadn’t told me the whole truth. What is it?’

Ironside’s voice was still quiet, pushing one word forward after another as if he was afraid that the least jar might upset the whole delicate structure.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ She la Spratt answered. ‘Why do you keep bothering me? Can’t you just leave me alone? Haven’t I got trouble enough?’

‘No, Mrs Spratt. Your troubles aren’t at an end yet. Not if you still care for your husband the way you say you do.’

The superintendent’s voice was still quiet, still careful.

‘Do you think I don’t care for him?’ Sheila Spratt burst out. ‘He’s the father of my children, isn’t he? We’ve lived together all these years. Just because he goes off with – It doesn’t mean that I have to change too.’

‘Goes off with who, Mrs Spratt?’

‘I didn’t say he’d gone off with anybody in particular. Just because he goes off. That’s all. Just goes off.’

‘No, Mrs Spratt. That’s just it, you see. You didn’t say who he has gone off with. You stopped yourself just in time. And it won’t do, you know. This is a murder case, Mrs Spratt. You’ve got to tell us.’

Slowly and carefully Sheila Spratt tipped the cake mixture into the tin she had been greasing. She went over to the oven and stooped to hear whether the gas was still burning full blast or whether the temperature she wanted had been reached. Evidently satisfied, she went and fetched the cake from the table, opened the oven door and slipped the tin in.

She straightened up.

‘June Curtis,’ she said. ‘June Curtis has been his mistress for months. He’s gone off with her. Gone for good.’

Sheila Spratt stood looking down at the black gas-rings of her cooker, burned to white at the tips by the many meals she had prepared for her husband and children. Familiarity is the equivalent of love. While familiarity lasts.

‘I’ve been expecting this for weeks,’ she said, staring at the patterned shapes of the gas-burners. ‘He’s mad about her, you know. Mad about her. Obsessed. Of course, he’s been working up to it for years.’

A small patch of spilt food, burned to a hard brown, caught her eye and she began scraping at it with the back of her thumbnail.

‘You could say he had been working up to it ever since he left school, come to that,’ she went on. ‘He’s got this fixed idea that any woman he has to do with must be some sort of film star. He’s always wasting his time at the pictures. And then when he actually met a girl who’s won top beauty competitions, I knew it had to come then.’

The thin hard layer of burnt food resisted her. She scraped at it more furiously, smiling her wry smile.

‘You’re wondering how we came to get married, I dare say,’ she added, flicking a glance back at Ironside. ‘I’m not a film star.’

She turned to the stove again.

‘You know, Peter, don’t you?’ she said.

Peter did not answer.

‘We were going to have a baby,’ she said. ‘I made him marry me. I wouldn’t let him get out of it.’

A tiny flake came off the brown spot.

‘I suppose it was silly of me, if you like,’ she continued. ‘Anyone would have told me it was bound to come to this in the end, that I was bound to be worse off.’

Suddenly she swung round and faced them squarely.

‘Well, if you want to know where that sex-mad copper of yours is,’ she said, ‘you’d better go and ask his beauty queen girl-friend. She’ll know, all right. She’ll know.’

Ironside stood up.

‘Then we will go and ask,’ he said gravely.

Standing in the dark hallway of the flats where the lift had deposited them among a flotsam of children’s battered toys, they discussed the Spratt children’s father, now so strongly attempting to escape from his parental responsibilities.

‘All that came as a shock to me,’ Peter said. ‘A hell of a shock. I mean, I am in a way a friend of Jack’s and I had no idea. I mean, no idea at all that all that was going on.’

‘In a way?’ said Ironside.

‘I beg your pardon, sir. I don’t quite get it.’

‘You said you were a friend of Spratt’s “in a way”.’

‘Yes, sir. That’s quite true, sir.’

Ironside smiled in the darkness of the hallway with sadness.

‘People keep telling me you were his best friend,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry to find a less heart-warming relationship.’

It was difficult for Peter in the gloom to make out exactly what the superintendent’s expression was.

‘Well, you know how it is, sir,’ he said. ‘People see you about together and decide you must have been pals all your life.’

‘But you were.’

Ironside stated the objection with mild dispassionateness.

‘Yes, I suppose you could say that, sir. It’s true enough, as I told you, we were mates at school and all that. But I wouldn’t honestly describe Jack as my best friend now.’

‘Not now? Ah, well.’

The superintendent took a deep sniff of the dank faintly child-smelling air of the hall and ventured into the open once more.

The boisterous wind and scurrying puffs of cotton-wool cloud in the deep blue sky appeared not to be giving the least consideration to the importance of the business Ironside and Peter were engaged on. They struck a note of persistent frivolity, equally out of keeping with the urgency of the situation and the expected dignity of London weather in what was still, after all, winter.

A detective-constable had gone missing in the middle of investigating a violent murder; it was beginning to look more and more as though his disappearance was connected with the case. And the wind continued in a thoroughly light-hearted fashion to chase dirty pieces of paper up and down the pavement. The sun continued to shine in a manner which could do no possible good. A wiggle of cloud actually sent a strip of shadow running down the whole length of the long terraced street opposite as if it was taking part in some sort of game.

They hurried into the car.

‘Right,’ said Ironside, ‘Miss June Curtis. We’ll try the address she gave us in Black Horse Street. But I’ve a notion we’re going to find the lady singularly elusive.’

June’s flat, when they reached it, proved to be at the top of a short but incredibly narrow flight of stairs in a building ingeniously fitted into a neglected space in the jigsaw pattern of Mayfair where land is measured by the square foot, if not by the square inch.

Ironside knocked heavily at the narrow panel of the front door. There was no answer.

He knocked again in a fashion that sent echoes up and down the constricted staircase. The noise at least produced an irritated head popping out of the equally narrow door on the floor below.

It was a head protected by a good many graciously arranged curls in a deep shade of lavender.

Ironside pounced on it.

‘We’re police officers looking for a Miss Curtis,’ he said. ‘Your neighbour. Do you happen to know where she is?’

‘Certainly not,’ said the head of lavender curls. ‘I don’t even know who she is.’

The narrow door closed with firmness and well-controlled calm.

They clattered down again and got into the car. They drove out into the excited traffic of Piccadilly, worked their way tediously round the halting jams of the Circus where the delicate statue of Eros, God of Love, had been temporarily boarded over in anticipation perhaps of Valentine’s Night junketings. Half-way up the sweep of Regent Street they turned off left and halted outside a building of modest proportions in neat, subdued pink brick. A small stainless steel doorplate bore the words ‘Star Bowl Ltd.’

The carpets were very deep, the flowers were very out of season, the receptionists were very out of Debrett, and they learnt not a thing. No one was willing to know anything about what they called the ‘actual details’ of the late Edward Pariss’s enterprises. Certainly they would never have the addresses of any of ‘the – er – people – er – actually taking part’.

Outside on the broad and almost empty pavement Superintendent Ironside took a deep breath.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’ve just got one idea left. It’s possible we may get a lead at her mother’s place. If we do, I shall pretend I expected it

all along.'

They waited for ten minutes to get across the steady stream of trundling red buses, snide taxis and quietly bored motorists making their way up Regent Street. The elderly bearded eccentric who sometimes camps out on one of the traffic islands gave them a wide-eyed stare as they waited to get through the far line of vehicles.

Ironside stared back.

'If it hadn't been for Teddy Pariss,' he said, 'I'd be doing the same thing as you, my man. Only in a way that society tolerates.'

At last they were over and into the familiar territory of Soho. Progress was still slow in the narrow streets and people stepped off the pavements with distressing frequency. But in the end Peter spotted the tall shop-dummy in the white chef's hat. There was a last delay as a little man in a tightly buttoned jacket pushed his barrow of hot chestnuts out into the roadway right under their noses. Their driver jammed on his brakes and muttered something. And then they were outside the peeling purple door with the extinguished neon sign above it saying 'Fay's Place'.

And downstairs Fay's Place was still Fay's Place. So much do mortals leave their mark on this world. Several days were to pass before the signwriter would come to blot out this trace of Fay Curtis's existence.

And the pattern she had imposed, the impress of her personality, still lingered too. The black-topped glass tables were as smart as

ever, except for a thin layer of dust. The tubular chairs still gave their air of vivid modernity, at least no more out-of-date than in the days when Fay Curtis herself had presided over their arrangement. The beach scene behind the little corner bar had not lost a flake of its paint. Its long-legged sexy girls still emanated an atmosphere of summertime abandon. Or as much of one as they had while Fay had watched over them so tenderly.

Superintendent Ironside stood in the middle of the little room, where night after night close-locked couples had swayed in the heady embrace of the dance, and surveyed the scene.

‘Very nice,’ he said, ‘very nice. And what, I wonder, lies behind that alluring curtain.’

He advanced towards the droopy black and gold curtain. And suddenly it was jerked brutally aside.

June stood there. Dark red hair, creamy complexion, statue stance. All ripeness.

‘Ah,’ said Ironside, ‘now this is a piece of luck. We were hoping to find you.’

‘Oh,’ said June. ‘Well, I wasn’t hoping to find you.’

‘No? Well, a policeman is used to that.’

June looked at him stonily.

‘I don’t much care whether you’re a policeman or someone come about the electricity,’ she said. ‘I just don’t want to see anyone. Not after that muck-up last night.’

‘Oh, but of course,’ Ironside said. ‘I forgot you might be preoccupied with your own affairs. Dear me, I must indeed be ready for retirement.’

‘What do you want?’ said June impatiently.

‘Well, first,’ said Ironside, ‘let me bring you a little good news: the unfortunate Miss Twelvetrees will not be taking up her dazzling prize.’

June’s eyes lit up.

‘What do you mean?’ she said. ‘You’re not having me on? This isn’t one of your bloody stupid jokes, is it?’

‘No, not one of my bloody stupid jokes. It’s a plain fact that Miss Twelvetrees has admitted to adding to her natural charms with two devilish pieces of foam rubber. And so has forfeited her chances in the great Miss Valentine contest.’

‘Padding in her bra? The stupid little twerp.’

‘Yes, indeed, you put it well,’ said Ironside. ‘And now perhaps by way of exchange you’ll tell us just where you’ve put Master Spratt.’

June’s eyebrows came together in a sudden frown.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

A smouldering anger hung on the heavy lines of her lips.

‘Spratt,’ said Ironside, ‘I want to know where he is.’

‘How the hell should I know? He’s one of your men, isn’t he? You keep tabs on him. It’s your business.’

‘Your business too, I think,’ Ironside said.

‘Now what on earth makes you think that?’

Ironside sighed deeply.

‘Oh, policemen get to hear so much,’ he said. ‘We trick people into telling us things, you know. And then other people insist on us getting to know things because they think it will cause unpleasantness. All that sort of thing. It’s very distressing, of course. But useful.’

‘Well, I don’t know where Jack is,’ June said. ‘Where’s he meant to be?’

Ironside’s eyebrows shot up.

‘Where are any of us meant to be?’ he asked.

June shrugged her splendid shoulders.

‘I’m going over to the Star Bowl offices,’ she said. ‘They may be wanting to see me. I don’t want to run myself out of the competition.’

She turned to go through the droopy curtain.

‘No,’ said Ironside.

In an instant she had swung round.

‘No? What do you mean, no? I’m in a hurry. This means something to me.’

‘Then by all means go,’ Ironside said. ‘But first I’d like you to satisfy Constable Lassington here that you don’t know where his

friend Spratt is.'

'What is this, for the hundredth time?' June said.

'Jack's gone,' said Peter cautiously. 'He didn't turn up first thing today, and then his wife told us he hadn't been home all night.'

'Well, I can't help that, can I?'

Ironside peered at her in the poor light. Even with sunshine outside, even with capricious and frivolous sunshine, the little semi-subterranean room was not well lit.

'We think you can help,' Ironside said.

It was June's turn to peer.

'Listen,' she said. 'I know him. We're quite friends. But if you imagine I can account for his every movement, you've got another think coming.'

'My, isn't it surprising how reluctant people are to admit knowing that young man more than slightly,' Ironside said. 'Don't you think you could change that statement just a little, Miss Curtis?'

'No, I don't.'

'Won't you try?'

'Look, I've told you all I've got to tell you. I know Jack, yes. But I'm not his nursemaid. And if you've gone and lost him, then you'd better go and find him.'

'Dear me,' Ironside said. 'Such vehemence.'

'Oh, run along.'

‘So, you don’t want to know what’s happened to your lover, Miss Curtis?’

June, who was once more making for the mysterious curtain, wheeled round.

‘He’s no lover of mine. Whoever gave you that crazy idea?’

Ironside smiled.

‘I generally say “a little bird told me”.’

‘Well, you can tell your little bird that they’ve got on the wrong track.’

‘Oh, no, I don’t think so. Tell me, Miss Curtis, just what are you doing here?’

Ironside stepped sharply across the little room till he stood between June and the curtain.

But all she did was to smile, slowly and with calm.

‘You don’t think I’m hiding him, do you?’ she said.

‘Why not?’ Ironside asked. ‘What could be more natural? After all, think what he did for you.’

‘For me? What do you mean?’

Ironside did not answer. Instead he turned to Peter.

‘Lassington,’ he said, ‘tell the lady the idea that flashed through your fertile mind. Without prejudice, of course. Without prejudice.’

Peter shifted about uneasily.

‘Do you think I ought. . .’

‘Oh, come, yes. We’ll put it on a regular basis. We’ll make it plain that this is all supposition. Just a notion. But let’s hear it.’

Peter looked straight at June.

‘We’ve reason to believe your mother wrote to Teddy Pariss just before she died,’ he said.

June betrayed no emotion.

‘They used to be friends,’ she said. ‘Before Teddy went up in the world, and Mum went down. But he wouldn’t have anything to do with her these days.’

Ironside tutted a little but made no comment. Peter went on.

‘Her letter was missing from Pariss’s office,’ he said.

Again June looked at him calmly.

He put down another card.

‘It occurred to us,’ he said, ‘that there might be something in the letter you wouldn’t want Pariss to know.’

‘What is this?’

June still sounded mystified.

Peter flared up.

‘Didn’t you get Jack to go and find that letter?’ he asked. ‘And didn’t he have to kill Pariss to get it?’

‘And I suppose you think I’m hiding him because of that?’ June said.

Her eyes were flashing with plain fury.

‘Well, don’t be too bloody clever,’ she stormed on. ‘Don’t be too bloody clever. All right, so Jack was my lover, if you want to call it that. But don’t think he ever meant so much to me. He kept hanging around and asking, and every now and again I gave in to him.’

She turned and glared at Ironside with an air of challenge.

‘My dear young lady,’ he said, ‘I’m sure you had no alternative.’

June swung back to Peter.

‘Just because of that you don’t think I owe him anything, do you?’ she snapped. ‘I don’t want him tagging on when I go for the Miss Globe title. And I’m no particular friend of his. If anyone’s his friend, it’s you, Mr Clever Peter Lassington.’

‘I’m no friend of his,’ Peter shouted.

He grabbed control of his temper.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘where is Jack?’

‘Look for him,’ said June.

‘Perhaps we had better go through that formality,’ said Ironside.

He left it to Peter. But standing with his hands in his pockets and a slight smile coming and going on his face, he made good and sure that the search was in fact by no means a formality.

And not until it was over and no sign of Jack had been found, did he let June go hurrying off to claim her inheritance at the Star Bowl offices.

When she had left, thudding rapidly up the narrow stairs, he stood with Peter looking appraisingly at the beach scene mural. Its energetic girls strained every muscle to entertain him. But for all their efforts they could never really know whether what they offered was to his taste.

Yet their entertainment is widely assumed to please all men.

At last Peter ventured to interrupt the scrutiny.

‘You know, sir,’ he said, ‘if Teddy Pariss got to know June was Jack’s mistress, he may have been using it to put pressure on June. And Jack would have taken that pretty hard.’

‘Well, you’re the expert on Mr Spratt,’ said the superintendent. ‘We musn’t forget your long-established friendship.’

‘You wouldn’t have to be a particular friend of Jack’s to know that, sir,’ Peter answered, a little crossly. ‘You must have known it for yourself. It’s easy to see he’s got that sort of temperament. It’s no use blinking the fact.’

‘It is indeed no use blinking any facts. Not the fact of the telephone call, nor the fact of the forced window, nor the facts of who was where at what time.’

‘But, surely, sir, there are always some odd unexplained items?’ Peter said.

‘There are. But then there have been many cases which left me quite unsatisfied, even after the judge had pronounced sentence.’

Ironside turned and started slowly pacing round the low-ceilinged room where in happier times couples danced cheek to cheek. Or in less happy times.

‘There were a lot of people who might quite reasonably have murdered Teddy Pariss,’ he said eventually. ‘Of course, we’re asked to say that murder is unreasonable, but somehow I prefer to think of it as eminently reasonable, but forbidden.’

Peter kept his face impassive.

‘Yes,’ Ironside went prosily on, ‘there’s much to be said for the view that Pariss ought to have been murdered. Assassinated, for the public good. Because, you know, he was a prime example of a peculiarly modern public menace. He did something which is not far short of unforgivable: he used sex. He used it for commercial reasons. And that to my mind is a great deal worse than simply making money out of it, like an honest brothel owner.’

He smiled a lugubrious smile.

‘My goodness,’ he said, ‘what a wax he would have got into if he’d heard himself accused of making money out of sex. You remember what were more or less his last words? His recorded testament on the Dictaphone. All that stuff about dignity. Oh, no, Teddy Pariss wasn’t doing anything as sordid as selling sex. All he was selling was tickets. Tickets for dance halls. But he sold them all

by using sex. By spreading the notion that every little girl is a creature of infinite desirability and attractiveness.'

He sighed.

'I suppose we've got to reconcile ourselves to that sort of thing,' he said. 'But don't let's pretend it isn't evil.'

He wheeled round and faced Peter.

'Lassington,' he said, 'you don't look as shocked as you ought to be.'

He smiled again.

'Perhaps it's because you're bored. The maudlin reflections of a superannuated policeman. And yet you ought to listen, you know. After all, I might be pointing infallibly to the murderer of Teddy Pariss. I might, indeed.'

Back at the Star Bowl ballroom a surprise was awaiting them. As they pulled up outside the stage door a familiar face peered blearily out. It was Bert Mullens, or, as some people preferred to call him, Charles Hake.

As soon as he saw Ironside's broad-shouldered, spare frame emerge from the dark blue car he whipped his head back into the shadows.

Ironside moved quickly.

He was across the pavement and into the building in a second. Just in time to see Bert making a shuffling departure in the direction of the narrow corridor leading through the pass-door to the ballroom itself.

'No,' Ironside called out. 'No, I don't think so.'

Bert slowed his shuffle to a half-hearted creep.

'Mr Mullens,' Ironside said, his voice echoing a little in the gloomy back-stage area, 'we shall want to see you in five minutes' time in Mr Pariss's office. You will be there.'

By now Bert had altered the creep away into a creep towards. He sidled towards his familiar box.

'Hallo, Mr Ironside,' he said. 'I wasn't expecting you, Mr Ironside.'

'In five minutes. Mr Pariss's office,' Ironside said.

Bert looked at the still-open stage door.

‘Lassington,’ the superintendent called, ‘have a word with my driver, will you? Ask him to remind Mr Mullens here when five minutes are up.’

Bert looked away from the open door. His eyes were blinking hard. Outside the errant sun dazzled and flickered, transforming the narrow back street with a deceptive sparkle of gaiety.

‘Right,’ said Ironside to Peter, ‘five minutes to get ourselves sorted out and then we’ll see what our friend has to say this merry morning.’

He marched off towards the little office where Teddy Pariss was now only the blurred remains of a chalked outline on the thick square of red carpeting.

And as his hand went out to open the lockless door he stiffened.

With a gesture behind him he signalled to Peter to be silent. Peter froze where he was. Ironside inclined his head so that his ear, which was large and well-formed, came up against the door. Gravely he stood listening.

But apparently there was little to hear, because after a few seconds he straightened up and, with one hand on the doorknob, pointed forward to indicate to Peter that he was about to burst in.

Behind him Peter crept to the point which would give him the maximum view of the room the moment the door opened.

Ironside nodded acknowledgement of the manoeuvre. Then he took a breath and gave a sharp push to the door.

It opened wide. Ironside stepped a pace inside.

At the desk, once a typist's table and now covered with the excessively luxurious items that Teddy Pariss had ordered to be placed there for his own use, Daisy Stitchford was bending. The lowest of the three drawers was wide open and she was methodically going through its contents.

'Ah, investigating, I see,' Ironside said.

Daisy Stitchford had begun to get up at the sound of the door opening. Now she sat down quickly on Teddy Pariss's black, padded chair, a seat which during his lifetime she would hardly have dared to usurp.

She opened her mouth twice but found nothing to say.

Ironside stood by the door looking down at her, equally silent.

After a few seconds Daisy pulled her high-buttoned white blouse sharply down. She glanced quickly at Ironside and cleared her throat.

But still said nothing.

For what seemed minutes, if no worse, the battle of wills went on. And at last it was Daisy who broke.

'Well,' she snapped, 'have you got nothing to do this morning, Mr Ironside?'

‘Oh, certainly, certainly,’ Ironside replied. ‘A great deal. Too much, indeed. An old man on the very edge of retirement. It isn’t fair.’

‘Then don’t let me stop you getting on,’ Daisy said.

Ironside looked down at the little desk, his eyes big with regret.

Daisy took the point. She bounced up.

‘If all you need is the use of this desk,’ she said, ‘I’m sure I’m not going to stand in your way.’

She marched towards the door.

‘Did you think I would be taking the morning off?’ Ironside asked.

Daisy tossed her head. The sparse, grey hair brushed hard on to the scalp lost not a jot of its severe tidiness.

‘I’m sure I don’t know how you conduct your work,’ she replied.

‘No, of course not,’ said Ironside soothingly.

Daisy looked towards the door again.

‘Otherwise,’ Ironside went on, ‘no doubt you’d have chosen some other time for your researches.’

Daisy’s head jerked round.

‘Just what do you mean by that?’

Ironside’s eyebrows quietly climbed up.

‘What do I mean? Why, simply that you wanted to know how my case was going and thought I might have left some tell-tale evidence behind,’ he said.

‘How dare you,’ said Daisy. ‘I – I shall report this.’

‘Yes,’ Ironside said, ‘I suppose that would be the thing to do. Of course, it’ll get you nowhere. Quite soon I shall be in the depths of the country. My mind will be full of the mating problems of the rabbit. I doubt if I shall even answer letters. Certainly not ones of complaint.’

Behind her glinting spectacles Daisy’s eyes poured out furious scorn.

‘In any case,’ she retorted, ‘if this is a sample of your work, there wouldn’t be any need for me to go through papers to find out how you’re getting on.’

‘Ah,’ said Ironside, ‘then that is what you were doing. Now, I wonder why you should be so interested.’

But Daisy was not so easily caught.

‘Mr Ironside,’ she said, each syllable clicking out like knitting needles being sharpened for single combat, ‘Mr Ironside, I have already told you that I was not looking in that drawer for any papers of yours.’

‘Of course not,’ said Ironside unexpectedly.

Daisy gave him a look of biting shrewdness.

Ironside remained unperturbed.

‘You were looking for Mr Pariss’s papers,’ he said. ‘The ones he wouldn’t show you in his lifetime.’

Daisy said nothing. Her dried-up little face never had much colour at the best of times but now it grew slowly drabber and drabber.

‘I – I’m sorry,’ she stammered out. ‘I’m not – I’m not feeling well.’

Behind the gimlet glasses her eyes closed. She swayed.

‘Now, now,’ Ironside said in a crooning, gentle voice.

He held a big, fleshless hand under her elbow and guided her into the shabby little kitchen chair in front of the desk.

She sprawled there reticently and gave a quiet moan.

‘Lassington,’ Ironside said, his voice for once loud enough to hear, ‘go and see if you can find Miss Stitchford a glass of water. And I’ve got some brandy in a flask in the car, I think I’ll get that too.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Peter said.

He turned to the door.

And like a flash the superintendent’s hand went out and stopped him. He turned.

Ironside’s finger was on his lips. He nodded his head towards the corner under the little window. Peter crept towards it and stood stock still.

The superintendent stepped over to the door, opened it briskly and then shut it. He swung round to look at Daisy, still lying back in the hard chair, still with her eyes tight closed.

And in an instant she had darted up.

Only to see Ironside standing smiling down at her.

‘Good gracious,’ he said, ‘what a comedy. Really, Miss Stitchford, you’re wasted as a secretary. The stage calls you, with its glamour and its rewards.’

Daisy Stitchford’s little mouth tightened with baffled fury.

‘I – I felt better,’ she said.

‘Then no doubt you’re better enough to answer my question,’ Ironside said.

‘What question?’ said Daisy. ‘Really, Superintendent, I think I’d better go and lie down somewhere. I’ve never had an attack like that before. I don’t feel up to answering questions.’

‘Now that’s a pity,’ Ironside said, ‘because I feel very much up to asking them. A little incident like that puts heart into a fellow. Sit down, Miss Stitchford.’

He grasped the battered upright chair and swung it round for Daisy to sit on.

She sat.

‘Now,’ said Ironside, ‘what papers in particular were you looking for? What was it that Mr Pariss was up to that you so much wanted

to know about?’

‘I refuse to answer,’ said Daisy.

Ironside put a hand on the back of her chair and leant over her.

‘Come, now,’ he said, ‘that sort of answer won’t do you any good. It’ll make me think the most unpleasant things about you.’

Daisy’s back straightened.

‘No,’ she said, ‘not a word.’

Ironside changed his tactics.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘I’m not making out that you were doing anything so very bad. Just looking at documents your late employer kept intriguingly hidden away. Very natural.’

Daisy smiled a little. And shook her head firmly.

‘Listen,’ said Ironside, ‘if you don’t tell me just what you were at, then I’ll begin to think there was something in that desk which was important for you to get hold of. Something that could connect you with Pariss’s death.’

‘Threats won’t help you,’ Daisy answered. ‘I know my rights. I certainly won’t speak without having a solicitor of my choice present, and I doubt if I’ll say much even then.’

‘But those papers, Miss Stitchford,’ Ironside said, ‘I’ve only got to go through them to find out what it is.’

‘Go through them then,’ Daisy said.

Ironside shook his head sadly from side to side like a faithful hound unjustly rebuked.

‘Won’t you tell me?’ he said.

‘No.’

Ironside sighed. He walked over to the door and opened it.

‘Miss Stitchford,’ he said, ‘it would have been in your own interests.’

‘I can take care of those, thank you very much,’ Daisy answered.

And out she trotted.

Ironside nodded to Peter to close the door.

When he had done so Peter turned back.

‘What do you think she could have wanted, sir?’ he said. ‘Shall we go through the drawers straight away?’

‘Oh, no. I don’t think so.’

‘But, sir, why not?’

‘Well, we mustn’t duplicate effort, you know.’

‘Dupli – You mean you’ve been through them already?’

‘Certainly. And fascinating they were too. But not really helpful as regards this case.’

‘But wasn’t there anything that she might have wanted to have got hold of?’

Ironside smiled.

‘I’m sorry to disappoint you,’ he said, ‘but there wasn’t a thing.’

‘Then what was all that business of trying to sneak off about, then?’

‘Do you know what I think?’

‘No, sir.’

‘I think that underneath that forbidding exterior a little heart was pit-pattering away in sheer panic. Though, on the other hand –’

There came a knock at the door.

Hesitant and apologetic though it was, it was enough to stop the superintendent finishing his sentence.

On the other hand. . . .

It was Bert Mullens whose reluctant tap on the door had stopped Superintendent Ironside formulating whatever doubts he had considered expressing about just what had caused Daisy Stitchford to behave in such a curious fashion.

The superintendent seemed, in fact, to be delighted at having been prevented from saying more.

‘Come in, come in,’ he called cheerfully.

‘You wanted to see me?’ Bert said, his doleful head only halfway through the door. ‘Or will another time do?’

‘No, no,’ said Ironside. ‘No time like the present. In you come. Sit yourself down. Make yourself comfortable.’

Bert perched on the edge of the hard chair. He did not look comfortable. His shoulders were hunched and his whole face drooped.

‘Well,’ Ironside said, ‘and are you feeling better now?’

‘I’m all right.’

It was a surly admission.

‘A terrible thing to have happened. A terrible thing. They told you some sleeping pills got into the tea-urn, didn’t they?’

‘It didn’t ought to have been allowed. That’s what.’

‘Ah, well, mistakes will happen.’

‘Somebody ought to get punished for that,’ Bert said.

‘Oh, come,’ said Ironside, ‘I prefer to think of it as carelessness, pardonable carelessness.’

Bert glared at him.

‘You ought to do something about finding out who done it anyhow,’ he said.

‘Oh, but we are, my dear fellow. All those fingerprints we’re trying to chase. All these people we’ve interviewed. Don’t you worry: we’ll find out who killed poor old Mr Pariss. Don’t you worry about that.’

‘Not that,’ said Bert. ‘About who put them pills in that urn. Might of finished me off for good and all.’

‘Oh. That. I’m sorry, I quite misunderstood you. But, you know, no one could have realized you were likely to go drinking all that much tea.’

‘It was going, wasn’t it? If I hadn’t drunk it, it would all of been wasted.’

‘Yes, of course, I see that. Perfectly sensible of you. But then you’re a sensible chap, aren’t you?’

A grunt.

Encouraged by this acknowledgement, Ironside went on.

‘Yes, a sensible chap. You know what can be done and what can’t.’

‘That was what was wrong with him,’ declared Bert unexpectedly. Ironside was not at a loss.

‘With Mr Pariss?’ he said. ‘I’d very much like to know what was wrong with him.’

‘Didn’t know what couldn’t be done,’ Bert said. ‘Always expecting a bloke to do more than what he could. It wasn’t fair.’

‘No. That would certainly be most unfair. But then on the other hand you expected quite a lot from Mr Pariss, didn’t you?’

‘Never mind what I expected, I never got it.’

Bert chuckled hoarsely.

‘But I do mind what you expected,’ said Ironside. ‘I mind very much indeed. I’d like to know just exactly what you did expect, Charles Hake.’

The pale light that had lit Bert’s face when he had brought off his joke faded.

‘What do you mean?’ he said.

‘You know what I mean.’

The end of Bert’s nose, normally shapeless and putty-coloured, began to go a throbbing red.

‘You’re on about that, are you?’ he said with croaking anger.

‘Well, it’s no use. If I’d of had something on that old bastard I might

of tried to use it. I admit that. Admit it. But I didn't have nothing. Not a sausage.'

He glared down at the pencil tray on the desk. The serried pencils lay as sharp and as pointed as when the late Mr Pariss had delighted to pick them up and, stabbing savagely at an innocent sheet of paper, break tip after tip.

Peter stepped quietly up.

'Tell me,' he said to Bert, 'what did you do with the money?'

'Money? I tell you there wasn't no money.'

'I think there was,' Peter said. 'Where have you got it tucked away?'

'No.'

'Oh, yes,' Peter went on. 'There must have been quite a bit to hide somewhere safe. Did you send it to one of those Swiss banks? Is that it?'

'I don't know what you're on about.'

'Don't you, indeed? I think you do. I think you opened an account at a bank in Switzerland, one of those banks that are obliged by law never in any circumstances to say a thing about their clients. You used one of those banks, didn't you?'

'I didn't. I never.'

Bert sounded as unconvincing as usual.

Peter, without taking his eyes off him for a fraction of a second, moved a pace nearer.

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘you’ve got one of those accounts with no name attached to it, haven’t you? One of those useful number-only accounts in Geneva, where they accept any sum sent and no questions asked. Isn’t that it?’

‘Geneva?’ Bert said. ‘What do you mean, Geneva? What would I be wanting to go to Geneva for?’

‘There’s no better place to hide dirty money.’

‘Look,’ Bert said with a touch of desperation, ‘I wasn’t blacking Teddy. If you must know, he wouldn’t let me. There’s some you can’t. They just laugh at you. Laugh in your face.’

‘And very right, too,’ said Superintendent Ironside. ‘It’s the only way to deal with a blackmailer. Isn’t it, Lassington?’

He stood up and went and opened the door.

‘So I can go, can I?’ said Bert.

He shambled towards the open door.

Just as he reached it Ironside spoke quietly in his ear.

‘Would you call yourself a patient man, Hake?’

Bert stopped still.

For a long time he did not answer.

‘Patient?’ he said when at last he did speak. ‘You ask me whether I’m a patient man? Didn’t I work for Teddy Pariss? Isn’t that answer

enough?’

‘That’s what I was wondering about, you know,’ said Ironside. ‘I was just wondering whether you were patient enough?’

Bert gave him one look of dawning understanding. The thought swam through the deep, greeny murk of his mind and hit at last on some concealed nerve.

He gave a short, deep groan. And then he turned and ran out of the room. Positively ran slap-bang into a man in a slightly military-looking belted raincoat coming carefully up the corridor.

The poor fellow, suddenly cannoned into in this way, was evidently taken completely off guard. He uttered an ear-splitting shriek, as if the humdrum, though unsavoury, form of Bert Mullens was a fearsome creature conjured out of the worst excesses of the science fiction shelf.

Ironside and Peter hurried out to see what was the matter.

‘Ere,’ said Bert with wild indignation, ‘what the hell do you think you’re doing? I never touched you.’

He turned to Ironside.

‘I swear to God I never touched the bloke,’ he said.

The man, for all the military air given him by his coat and the peaked cap he wore pulled sharply down over his forehead, still cowered against the wall of the passage. It might have looked as if Bert had in fact launched a blood-thirsty attack on him, only a mere glance at Bert himself was enough to disprove the notion.

Peter, accustomed to the vagaries of a constable's beat in London's West End, stepped forward.

'Now, what's going on?' he said. 'I'm a police officer.'

The man in the cap promptly darted a glance back in the direction of the stage door. It was a glance Peter knew well.

He took a pace nearer.

'Now, then,' he said, 'what are you doing here?'

Realizing that there was nothing for it but to put a bold face on it, the man left the comfort of the corridor wall.

'Ah, officer,' he said, 'just the chappie.'

Peter was not as impressed as was intended.

'Well?'

'I think you could probably help me a bit here,' the man said. 'Fact is, I'm looking for the O.C.'

'What O.C.?' said Peter mercilessly.

Under the military raincoat the man squared his shoulders.

'Officer in charge, don't you know,' he said.

'In charge of what?' Peter said.

'Oh, well, in charge of the show. Want a word with him, as a matter of fact.'

Ironside from the doorway of Teddy Pariss's office decided to take a hand.

‘Can I do anything for you?’ he said without introducing himself further.

‘Oh Oh, good show. You can help me, as a matter of fact. Name of Mortenson. Captain Mortenson, as a matter of fact.’

‘Oh, yes?’

Captain Mortenson looked around him nervously. Much as he might have done when about to lead his men through a particularly sticky patch of the Desert War.

‘It’s like this, old boy,’ he said. ‘I run a sort of club, you know. Quite a nice little show really. Well I mean to say when I say “run” I’m actually two i/c. Haven’t got the capital meself.’

‘What’s the name of this club?’ Ironside asked in a voice which, for once, could all too clearly be heard.

‘Garden of Allah, actually, old boy.’

Captain Mortenson’s hand dived into the recesses of his trench coat.

‘Got a card here somewhere as a matter of fact,’ he said. ‘If you’d care to look in any time I’d be only too glad.’

‘Don’t bother,’ Ironside said. ‘I expect to be leaving for the country quite soon.’

‘Oh, yes? Good show. Spot of huntin’, I dare say.’

‘No,’ said Ironside firmly. ‘I intend to give up hunting. Completely.’

‘Oh. Well, dare say you know best, old boy.’

‘I do. And now what can I do for you?’

Captain Mortenson licked his thin lips.

‘It’s like this actually, old boy,’ he said. ‘Well, you know all the publicity there was in the paper this morning for this place. Well, it struck me that it would be a pretty good idea to get hold of a couple of the girls who were actually in the contest.’

‘I see,’ said Ironside.

‘Wanted to make arrangements, as a matter of fact,’ said Captain Mortenson. ‘Course I must make it clear at the outset I can’t offer a great deal in the way of ackers. Though you’d get your ten per cent, old man. I’d see to that.’

‘It’s kind of you,’ said Ironside.

‘But then on the other hand,’ Captain Mortenson went on, his voice slipping into a fast, hopeful jabber, ‘the girls wouldn’t have to do very much. Just slip off the old costume, don’t you know. Give a wiggle or two, I mean, if I can say they’re straight from the death line-up at the Star Bowl, that should fix it. Wouldn’t you think?’

‘As a detective officer on the point of retirement,’ Ironside said, ‘happily I don’t have to think about things like that. I’ll leave it to your good taste and judgement, Captain.’

For a moment Captain Mortenson’s narrow eyes blazed with fury. Then better sense prevailed.

‘Oh. Come to the wrong shop, have I?’ he said. ‘Well, I’d better be pushing off then.’

He retreated, in moderately good order considering everything, in the general direction of the sunlit streets.

Ironside watched him go.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘I think we’d better hurry.’

‘Hurry, sir?’ said Peter.

‘Before that gentleman gets round to Miss Twelvetrees. We don’t want to have to dig her out of the Garden of Allah.’

‘Lindylou?’ Peter said.

‘Well, who else? After all, you were the one who used to be always reminding me she was in the next room when the murder took place. At least, you kept reminding me until your friend Spratt ran off. And there’s nothing we can do about him for the moment.’

When they reached the car Ironside gave the driver Lindylou’s address without so much as taking his note-book out of his pocket. Peter sat in silence, glancing at him from time to time speculatively.

The traffic was a little easier at this time of the morning and they were soon zooming along the top side of the Park at a great rate. Ironside looked out at the dark green winter grass and the great, bare trees.

‘They had sheep there during the war,’ he said. ‘Pity.’

There was no way of telling whether he thought it was a pity that the departure of the sheep had deprived this part of London of a touchingly rural presence or whether he thought the whole war-time pastoral venture had been ill-judged.

Peter refrained from going into the matter.

They swept through the wide streets and past the shabbyish stately houses of Bayswater. Lindylou lived in a flat at the top of a big, crumbling five-storey house in a downgraded part of Paddington. The railings in the front were broken and only a blackened and knotted piece of old rope stopped children from falling into the area yawning invitingly between house and pavement.

They toiled up the uncarpeted, fiendishly dark and noticeably pungent stairs.

Lindylou turned out to be at home, and on her own. But this, it seemed, was an unusual state of affairs.

‘Mum and Dad’s out at work,’ she said. ‘And the kids are at school or else playing out the back.’

‘How many kids are there?’ Ironside asked, his deep-set eyes scanning the crowded room methodically.

‘There’s five after me,’ Lindylou said.

‘And you all live here?’

‘There’s the room next door.’

‘Ah, yes.’

Ironside picked a cheaply framed photograph off the shiny but battered sideboard. It was of Lindylou looking a little younger than she did at present and a good deal less sophisticated. Underneath was written in small elaborate handwriting 'Linda Twelve-trees'.

'Well, sit down, Miss Twelvetrees,' Ironside said. 'We've got a few more questions we'd like to ask you.'

'What about?' said Lindylou pertly.

She sat on the edge of the arm of a sofa which could be turned into a bed. She may have chosen this spot partly because the actual seat of the sofa was piled with broken toys at one end and with a heap of comics at the other. But it was mostly to assert her independence, a fact indicated by the aggressive way she stuck out those parts of her which she could stick out most conveniently.

'I want you to tell me exactly what you did while you were in the judges' room,' Ironside said.

He slipped from his pocket a note-book and made a good deal of fuss about turning up a particular page. Standing behind him Peter could see what was written there.

Measurements taken at bust, waist and hips. Ideal considered to be bust and hips of equal size. Why?

One-piece bathing costumes obligatory. Strong ruling against any form of bones or padding. Elastic material acceptable.

Skin complaints: pruritus, eczema, seborrhoea, acne, psoriasis, urticaria.

Advantages: immediate prize up to £2,000: possible advertising offers, chance of becoming prime figure in large-scale campaign: films, commercial and entertainment (Are the two the same?): club entertaining, £80 a week offer.

‘Look,’ said Lindylou, ‘I told you. I told you before. What you want to hear it all again for?’

‘Perhaps you weren’t telling the exact truth,’ Ironside said.

‘Why not?’ said Lindylou. ‘Just because I happen to be attractive to men you think I’m a bloody liar.’

‘Ah, now, that’s interesting,’ Ironside said. ‘You’re attractive to men, are you?’

‘Course I am. I’m not bad, you know.’

She wiggled.

‘I rather think you are bad.’

‘Bad? Me? Why? What do you mean?’

Something of her assurance dropped away and lay broken on the floor.

‘It’s bad to tell lies,’ Ironside said.

Lindylou stuck her nose in the air.

‘Oh, lies,’ she said. ‘That. And anyhow what lies have I told? Go on, you prove I told a single lie.’

Ironside reached behind him to the shiny, battered sideboard and picked up the photograph.

‘How about this?’ he said.

Lindylou looked at the photograph. Its tin frame, silvered over, had a line of rust running up from the bottom left hand corner.

‘What’s a lie about that?’ she said.

‘You tell me, Linda.’

‘Oh, the name, you mean. Well, of course, I was christened Linda. But I call myself Lindylou. Have done ever since I was twelve. It’s more sexy.’

‘But I asked you to give me your name. Not what you’d like to be called.’

‘Can’t see that it matters.’

Lindylou, or Linda, shrugged.

‘I’ll tell you why it matters,’ said Ironside. ‘It matters because I’ve no doubt now that all you’ve told me so far is just the same. What you’d have liked to have happened, not what did.’

Linda, or Lindylou, jumped off the arm of the sofa. Her glance went willy-nilly to the door. Peter, standing behind the superintendent, was within a yard of it, heavy and impassive as only a police constable can be.

‘I never,’ Lindylou said. ‘I tell you I never. Every word that I told you, except about my name, was God’s truth.’

‘Then suppose you tell it to me once again. And this time be careful.’

Lindylou, crestfallen at last, began her recital.

‘Well, the girls told me I ought to go in and show myself to the judges like I said.’

‘Like what?’

She looked at the threadbare piece of carpeting on the floor.

‘With nothing on.’

‘Good.’

Ironside put a tick beside the first item in his note-book, the one about measurements.

‘So we fixed up how I was to get past old Bert at the door. And then all the girls went out; and I took off my things. Then I peeped out of the door.’

‘Could you see Mullens’s box?’

‘Well, not really. Because of all the girls crowding round him, you see.’

Ironside ticked the second item. One-piece costumes obligatory.

And soon he had ticked every item on the page and a good many more on the next one. Because Lindylou’s story hardly varied in a single particular from what she had told them before.

At last Ironside stood up, thanked Lindylou and clumped heavily down the uncarpeted stairs. Peter followed.

Only when they were back in Teddy Pariss’s office did Ironside comment.

‘You can only go on asking them,’ he said. ‘The idea is that they break under the strain before you do. Though I don’t think they should try it out with a poor old broken-down hack who can only think of that cottage in the country and all those rabbits waiting to be bred.’

‘Doesn’t there come a point where you just have to give up?’ Peter asked.

Ironside’s eyebrows rose.

‘Give up? Give up? What’s this? A distressing lack of optimism in one so young.’

‘But all the same, sir,’ Peter said earnestly, ‘there are crimes, murder cases, where the record is closed eventually.’

‘Very true.’

‘I mean, I know there are cases where the police – where we know who the murderer is but can’t prove anything.’

‘A shocking and deplorable state of affairs.’

‘But it does happen, sir.’

‘Oh, yes, if you insist on it, it does happen.’

‘Well, it looks to me, sir, as if that’s what it may be like this time. I can’t see us getting anywhere much further. Not after many more sessions like Lindylou just now. And in the end we shall just be left with Jack.’

‘Yes, I do believe you may be right,’ Ironside said, pushing back the late Teddy’s heavy chair. ‘The time has come to see your friend Jack.’

He stood up abruptly, thrusting the chair across the square of thick carpet.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘let’s go and talk to Jack.’

Peter Lassington looked at Superintendent Ironside as if he were seeing him for the first time, and as if a human being was something totally extraordinary.

Ironside stood calmly where he was, perhaps recording the effects of his claim about Jack. His craggy face, with the jutting thick grey eyebrows, looked mildly curious. His eyes were sombre but alive and active.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said, ‘you seem surprised.’

Peter did not at first answer. The pink and white colour of his face, always a little unsuitable for a policeman, came and went.

‘I don’t quite know what you mean, sir,’ he said eventually.

‘Don’t you? I should have thought it was a plain, simple sentence. I suggested that we should go and talk to your friend Spratt. Until we do, we’re unlikely to clear up this business. And after all we’re both being paid to do that.’

‘Yes,’ said Peter, ‘I know that Jack will have to be found. But all the same I don’t quite see how you’re going to do it.’

Ironside permitted himself a slight smile.

‘It’s on the cards I won’t be able to do it,’ he said. ‘You know how it is, I dare say. One makes a series of what one supposes are rational deductions. And one hopes that at the end the answer will

prove to correspond to reality. But that's always an abominably chancy business.'

Peter relaxed a little.

'Then where do you think he is, sir?' he asked.

'Well, it's like this,' Ironside said. 'I made an initial premise that something in particular must have sent him off. Now, so far as I know there was nothing to have done that. He'd been trailing round with me all day. I'd see what he'd seen. There was nothing to make him go suddenly off like that.'

'I'm not so sure you're right, you know, sir,' Peter said tentatively. 'I mean, the way I look at it is that by late last night it had become pretty obvious that we'd come up against a blank wall. So that we were bound to look for new lines, and, once we'd started to do that, it wouldn't be long before Jack came under pretty heavy suspicion.'

'You think that, do you?' Ironside said. 'Well, I didn't. I reasoned otherwise. I reasoned that he must have been sent off. But by just such arguments as you've been putting, Constable Lassington.'

His voice grew hard at these last words.

Peter looked at him warily.

'Yes,' said Ironside, 'I thought he must have talked to somebody. And who more likely than his best friend? It was pretty unfortunate that people kept mentioning that you and he were such friends. I couldn't have escaped thinking about it.'

‘But, sir –’

‘Oh, come, my good chap, there’s no need to look so worried. After all, friendship is generally considered quite an estimable quality. So much so that it confuses people when they find tear-aways exhibiting it. But that’s another matter.’

‘Look here, sir,’ Peter said, ‘are you making out that I helped a murder suspect get away?’

‘Yes,’ said Ironside, ‘since you ask, I am,’

‘Well –’

‘It’s a serious matter, of course. You’ll be subject to disciplinary proceedings. But there’ll be people who think none the worse of you for that. So cheer up, my good fellow.’

‘Sir,’ said Peter. ‘I deny it absolutely.’

‘Do you? Well, perhaps I’d better go on with my chain of reasoning. And we must hope for your sake that it’s as fallible as such things usually are.’

Peter glowered.

‘Now,’ said Ironside, ‘suppose for the sake of argument that your friend Spratt was persuaded into believing that things looked so bad for him that the only thing to do was to go into hiding. Well, now, he’s a policeman: he knows what a hue and cry we make when one of our number goes astray. He’s a pretty good idea that he’ll have a poor chance of getting clear away. Unless he has help. Unless he has an intelligence service of his own.’

Ironside nodded towards Peter.

‘I’m referring to you, of course, my good chap.’

‘Sir, I didn’t –’

‘No, no. I know. That’s your case. At present. But let me have my say. You see, we go on from having an intelligence source to the necessity for keeping in close contact with it.’

‘I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t see why I have to stay and listen to all this. I’ve said it’s nonsense. If you want to act on it, act on it. But until you do, I’m going to ignore it.’

Peter turned to the door.

‘No, no, my good fellow. You can’t go giving warnings to Spratt now. It’s too late, you see.’

‘All right, then,’ Peter said furiously. ‘If you think you know where he is, why don’t you go and get him? He’s run off, hasn’t he? It’s your duty to get hold of him.’

‘A timely reminder,’ said Ironside.

He swung round and was out of the door of the little office before Peter had entirely realized what was happening. As soon as he did he leapt after him.

Ironside was tugging open the double doors leading to the long yard.

In the bright capricious sunshine the place looked if possible even more depressing than it had in the pouring, cold dutiful rain of the

day before.

Ironside looked up and down its whole length. A sparrow was perched on the rim of one of the two oil drums.

‘Pattern, you know,’ he said. ‘An idea gets put into your head, and you follow it through. It seems very clever at the time, but it forms a pattern. Lindylou hides here and . . .’

He was at the door of the lean-to shed. He jerked it open.

Jack was standing there, grinning foolishly.

‘Ah, there you are, sir.’

The voice came from behind them, from the open double doors.

Peter Lassington wheeled round as if a ghost had spoken. But it was only a rather podgy-faced man of medium height wearing a beltless, drab mackintosh and a green pork-pie hat. Superintendent Ironside did not seem at all alarmed at his appearance. And Jack was still too busy sheepishly grinning to react at all.

‘Ah, it’s you, Sergeant Frollet,’ Ironside said. ‘I was beginning to wonder where you’d got to.’

‘I’m hardly done with the Jeymer Avenue case as it is, sir,’ Sergeant Frollet said.

‘No break? No time off?’ Ironside said. ‘Dear me, how badly they treat you.’

Evidently Frollet knew the superintendent. He answered by simply smiling enigmatically.

‘Well, now,’ said Ironside, ‘does this visit mean you got what I wanted?’

‘Oh, I think so, sir.’

Frollet’s face stayed totally impassive, but the words nevertheless exuded confidence.

‘Isn’t that splendid?’ said Ironside. ‘Such energy, such determination.’

Sergeant Frollet remained unmoved.

‘But will he talk, my good Sergeant?’ Ironside said. ‘Will he stand up in court?’

The sergeant pulled a face.

‘You’ve put your finger on it, sir, as per usual.’

‘Well,’ Ironside said, ‘you’d better go and see what you can do about it, hadn’t you?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Frollet with a heavy sigh.

And he turned and walked off down the corridor and round the corner in the direction of the stage door.

Ironside looked from Peter to Jack and from Jack to Peter again.

‘A replacement for the unfortunate Sergeant Milk,’ he said. ‘And not before time, too. I couldn’t go on for ever working with two totally inexperienced men, could I?’

Jack suddenly flashed out his old happy grin.

‘Especially when one of them made a damned fool of himself scuttering off in the middle of the case, sir,’ he said.

‘Exactly,’ said Ironside. ‘We’d better go inside for you to explain yourself.’

He led the way. He did nothing directly to imply that Jack was under escort, but the fact remained that by a half-second’s hesitation as they reached the doors into the building he effectively made sure that Jack was in no position to cut and run for it.

Once they had got into the office Ironside picked up the telephone.

‘Give me a line, please,’ he said.

Jack looked at Peter with a raised eyebrow, Peter looked away.

The click of the connexion being made was audible in the total silence of the little office. Ironside dialled. They were able to hear the phone at the other end ringing and ringing. Patiently, expressionlessly Ironside waited. At last a voice, a woman’s voice, answered.

‘Mrs Spratt? This is Superintendent Ironside. I’d like you to come down straight away to the Star Bowl ballroom. You know where it is? Take a taxi. Your husband’s here.’

He put down the receiver. There had scarcely been time for Sheila Spratt to reply.

Jack was no longer grinning.

Ironside sat down in Teddy Pariss's padded black leather chair. It was a long time before he spoke.

'All right,' he said at last, suddenly breaking the silence, 'I'd like that explanation, Spratt.'

'Sir.'

It was Peter Lassington.

Ironside turned his sombre face towards him.

'Well?'

'I'm sorry, sir, but there's the matter of whether it's right to ask him any questions. I mean, there's the Judges' Rules, sir. Ought he to be asked anything when he's on the point of being charged? I honestly feel, sir, I can't stand by and see that happen.'

A slow smile worked its way over Ironside's face.

'Ah, yes,' he said, 'I see it is indeed time I went down to Essex and started presiding over the affairs of rabbits. To have been warned by a constable that I am in danger of exceeding my powers, it's a bad moment.'

'I'm sorry, sir,' Peter said, 'but honestly I thought it was my duty.'

'And honesty, as I'm always saying,' Ironside replied, 'is by far the best policy.'

'All the same, sir, I'm sorry.'

Ironside's smile suddenly turned sharply wolfish.

‘However in this case there’s no question of making a charge,’ he said.

‘No question?’

Peter looked comically incredulous.

‘No, Lassington, when all’s said and done, you must let me conduct this investigation in my own way and using my own judgement, however dodderly I appear to be. No, at present I am not considering a charge of murder. That may come, and sooner than you think likely. But for the moment I’m concerned with dereliction of duty by a police officer. Well, Spratt?’

The face he turned to Jack had lost all trace of any smile, wolfish or otherwise.

Jack took a deep breath.

‘I can see now, sir,’ he said, ‘that I was a fool, a bloody fool.’

‘Of course,’ said Ironside. ‘Go on.’

Jack looked from side to side. Looked at Peter, looked at the window.

‘It was like this, sir,’ he said. ‘I’d got caught up with June, June Curtis. She means everything in the world to me. She’s going to go places, sir. She’s going to end up Miss Globe, I know that. And I want to be right there with her, sir. I can think of nothing else. She’s all that I’ve ever dreamt of. And I don’t care how wrong it is or anything, I’m going to go with her. And everything and everyone else can go to hell.’

‘A romantic notion,’ said Ironside. ‘And of course highly praiseworthy as such. We’re taught that the world’s well lost for love. We must try to be tolerant when we see the actual process going on. Though, of course, you’ve committed a number of offences against regulations.’

‘Well, I’ll take my punishment for them, sir,’ Jack said. ‘But I may as well tell you now, I’m resigning from the force at the first chance I get. I’m finished with all this.’

‘Yes, I suppose you must be. However, let’s deal with less grandiose matters for a few moments. You’ve told us, in eloquent and heart-touching terms, of your attachment to Miss Curtis. You are aware of the course of our investigations. What made you suddenly take to your heels in that way?’

‘Well, sir, I was hanging round the place pretty well at the time of the murder.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Ironside, ‘I knew that. Your Inspector Hammersby said he’d met you at the door when I first had the pleasure of your acquaintance.’

‘So you knew, sir, all along?’

‘The fact was put under my eyes. I could scarcely not have known.’

‘Yes, sir. Well, I looked at it this way. Things seemed to have got to the point where you were bound to take a fresh look at all the facts. I mean, none of the people who’d first come under suspicion

had cracked up or anything. And I thought that as soon as you looked round again you'd realize about me.'

'I'm flattered,' Ironside said. 'I thought you and Lassington here had a much lower opinion of my powers. But do go on. I find all this most interesting.'

'Yes, sir. Well, sir, when I thought I was going to be a murder suspect as well I decided that the time had come to make the break. I've been on the verge of it before, sir, but now I thought "To hell with it, I'll skive off. I'll leave all this behind and get away with June."'

'You thought that?'

'Yes, I did, sir. I suppose it sounds silly to you, but it's what I thought.'

'Unaided? These remarkable reflections were the product of your mind alone?'

Jack just glanced over at Peter.

'Yes, sir,' he said. 'They were. It was my own idea.'

'Suitably romantic, certainly,' Ironside said. 'But not, of course, true. Is it, Lassington?'

Peter bit his lower lip and said nothing.

Ironside smiled.

'The schoolboy code,' he said, 'you know, it amounts to that. The code says that the boy who's caught must never sneak on his

accomplices. I've got it right, haven't I? I'm rather weak in that particular subject.'

He paused, but both Jack and Peter decided to treat his question as rhetorical. Ironside, unfortunately, had decided the opposite.

'Well,' he said, 'have I got the code right, Spratt? Isn't that the rule: never sneak once you're caught?'

'I suppose it is, sir,' said Jack.

'You suppose, Spratt. Is it, or isn't it?'

'Yes, sir, it is.'

'Very well, then. I've already said I'm not particularly familiar with such attitudes, and I'll tell you this: I don't intend to have any truck with them now. I propose, however unpleasant it is, to behave as if this was the real world. So, Spratt, I'd be obliged if you'd tell the truth. It was Lassington who put this idea into your head, wasn't it?'

Jack looked at Peter helplessly. Peter kept his face rigidly still.

'I've already explained to Lassington that it was possible to deduce where you were hiding by starting from the premise that he had suggested you should disappear,' Ironside said. 'So, you see, all this high-mindedness is totally unnecessary. Now, answer up and don't waste any more time. Did Lassington put this idea into your head? Yes or no?'

Once more Jack looked across at Peter.

‘Yes, sir,’ he said, ‘he did.’

He gave Peter a last look.

‘Yes, he did, sir,’ he went on. ‘In a manner of speaking I suppose if it’s a question of strict truth he was the one who first mentioned it. We were standing just by the stage door here, sir, waiting to go out into the rain last night, and we talked over the case a bit. And then Pete – then Lassington, sir, put it to me that I was in a pretty dicey position and suggested a possible way out. But it was my decision to do it, sir, my decision entirely.’

‘So long as we have the truth,’ Ironside said. ‘Luckily I’m not much concerned with apportioning the blame. Perhaps, who knows, Lassington’s exemplary regard for a friend’s welfare will be accounted a good deed?’

‘It was, sir,’ Jack said, with a touch of his old defiance.

‘I’m happy that you should think so. However, the unfortunate thing is that it was based on a false premise.’

‘A false premise, sir?’

‘Yes. You’re aware of the meaning of such an excessively pedantic expression?’

‘It means that you think I’ve got the whole thing wrong at the start,’ Jack said in an angry tone as if thoroughly fed up at last with Ironside’s painstakingly pin-pricked manner.

‘Exactly so,’ said Ironside. ‘And expressed in language both simple and forcible. An enviable asset.’

‘Look,’ said Jack, ‘just what are you getting at? What the hell is this about me getting it all about-face?’

Ironside held up a broad palm as if to avert this stream of fury.

‘I’ll try to match your simplicity, Constable,’ he said. ‘It’s just this: if you think you’re ever going to start a new life with Miss Curtis, you couldn’t be more wrong. She wouldn’t have you.’

‘It’s a lie. A damned, bloody lie.’

Jack’s face was greyly white.

‘Well, now,’ said Ironside cosily, ‘let’s try and recall Miss Curtis’s exact words. I think we could do that, Lassington, don’t you?’

He turned and looked at Peter. Apparently this was another of his rhetorical questions to which he expected an answer.

Peter eventually obliged.

‘I’m not sure, sir, exactly what she said,’ he replied. ‘I mean, she was being pressed pretty hard and all that.’

Ironside pulled the caricature of a long face.

‘Tut,’ he said, ‘an inability to remember the exact words used by a witness in a key interview. You’ll have to smarten yourself up a bit there, lad, if you’re to get into the C.I.D.

‘Especially as this business is going to be a fair setback to you,’ he added.

He turned back to Jack.

‘Now,’ he said. ‘Miss Curtis. What exactly did she say? I’ll tell you. She said: “All right, so Jack was my lover but don’t think he ever meant so much to me. He kept hanging around and kept asking and every now and again I gave in to him.” I think I’ve got it more or less correctly.’

Jack was saying nothing. But the expression of the eyes in his dead-white face conveyed an urgent enough message, a simple plea to Ironside to unsay the words. A childish cry to have the broken world mended by Daddy.

The silence grew in the little room where not so long before Teddy Pariss had perhaps made some animal sound as a paper-knife with the representation of a naked girl forming its hilt had been thrust powerfully into his back. The spell was broken by a pawing knock at the door.

‘Ah, come in, come in,’ Superintendent Ironside said with cheerful normality.

The door opened six inches. Bert Mullens thrust his bleary-eyed head in.

‘There’s a lady,’ he said. ‘Tells me you want to see her.’

He emanated unbelief.

‘I do indeed,’ said Ironside.

He got up and walked round the little desk to the door. He opened it wide.

‘Do come in, Mrs Spratt,’ he said.

Sheila Spratt walked in. She looked at Jack and then looked down at the jumble of luxury objects on the desk top in front of her.

‘Thank you, Mullens,’ Ironside said. ‘I think we shall be able to manage now.’

Bert shuffled reluctantly away. They stood listening to his indeterminate footsteps gradually going along the corridor. At last Ironside spoke.

‘I’ve just been telling your husband that Miss Curtis isn’t interested, Mrs Spratt,’ he said. ‘She has other objects in mind. The Miss Globe title is apparently more attractive than your Jack.’

Jack took a step forward. His fist was clenched.

Ironside ignored him. He was looking at Sheila Spratt with the expression of mild curiosity that Peter had seen on his face before.

It took several seconds for Sheila to absorb what had been said. At last she turned to Jack.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘dreams don’t always come true, then, do they?’

Jack shook his head from side to side in agreement, like a dumb beast.

‘I suppose you’ll be coming back after all?’ his wife said.

‘I don’t know.’

Ironside cleared his throat.

‘You mustn’t imagine it’ll be his choice, Mrs Spratt,’ he said. ‘You realize that with his notorious attachment to Miss Curtis and the

fact that he was admittedly within a few yards of this room when Pariss was murdered make things very awkward for him. Just because he's explained a certain amount to us, it doesn't necessarily mean that he isn't the man we want.'

Sheila Spratt looked at Ironside.

'Don't you understand a thing?' she said. 'Haven't I told you already? I'm married to Jack. We've been husband and wife for years. We've got children. It doesn't make any difference to me whether he's a murderer or not.'

Ironside smiled.

'It would make a difference to some people,' he said. 'Not everybody gets quite as involved in their marriage as you do, Mrs Spratt.'

'Listen.'

Jack spoke hoarsely.

'Listen,' he said, 'I'm beginning to learn. Sheila, will you –'

The door opened abruptly.

Sergeant Frollet came briskly in. He stopped for a moment when he saw Sheila and looked at Ironside as if asking for instructions.

'Ah, Frollet,' the superintendent said. 'An opportune interruption. Constable Spratt was about to say something he would do better to keep for the intimacy of the domestic circle.'

A little gleam of fury showed in the corners of Jack's eyes. But Ironside was too busy with Frollet.

'You've made some progress?' he asked him.

The sergeant let a faintly pleased expression appear on his podgy face.

'Yes, sir,' he said. 'Our friend will stand up to it all the way. I'd bet my last bob on it.'

Ironside pursed his lips as if to whistle.

'Would you, indeed?' he said.

He turned to Sheila Spratt.

'Mrs Spratt,' he said, 'I think, if you don't mind, you'd better leave us now. We turn out to have some unexpectedly serious business to transact.'

Whether it was because of the emotional upheavals she had been experiencing or because she was unused to the superintendent's circumlocutions, Sheila Spratt did not appear to have understood a word of what he had said.

'Mrs Spratt,' he repeated, 'I am about to clear up this business. Please go away.'

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This time Sheila Spratt did understand. Ironside was about to make an arrest. Whatever it was Sergeant Frollet had told him so cryptically was apparently what he had been waiting for. She took one look at her husband. He was standing by the wall of the little room, looking as though the turmoil of the last few minutes had paralysed his big body and left only his mind working furiously but aimlessly to sort everything out. It was a long look.

As if it might be the last look.

Then she turned and without another word left. They watched the door shut behind her.

Superintendent Ironside slowly surveyed the room.

On the floor at his feet a few dim patches of whitish powder were all that was left of the chalk outline that had been drawn with care round the body of Teddy Pariss, organizer of the Miss Valentine contest, focus and pinpoint for so many aspiring young ladies from so many near and distant places.

‘Well, now, gentlemen,’ he said, ‘let’s just establish a few facts. There’s something to be said for clearing the decks. Seeing things as they are may not be particularly savoury, but at least it’s less complicated than seeing things any other way.’

He sat on the edge of the desk, displacing the heavy silver tray of pencils.

‘And it’s facts we’ve got to deal with,’ he went on. ‘If you’re set on making a career as a detective that’s one of the first things you’ve got to realize. Ideas are all very well, notions about what someone had in the back of their mind to make them do such a thing are all very well, but they’re precious little good to you when you come down to it. No, you must concentrate on the facts. And what is the first fact we come up against in this case? Spratt?’

He looked hard across at Jack.

Jack shook his head wearily.

‘Well, Lassington, then?’

Peter concentrated.

‘I suppose that Pariss was killed, sir.’

‘Good. We accept that he was killed and to get a knife in him in that position it must have been a deliberate assault. What next?’

Peter concentrated again.

‘When he was killed, sir?’ he asked.

‘Excellent. Yes, when he was killed. What are the facts that made it necessary for Teddy Pariss to be killed just at the time he was?’

He shot a glance at Jack. But Jack only blinked.

‘Then I’ll tell you,’ Ironside said. ‘We come up at once against that telephone call to Lassington at his flat. Don’t we? Isn’t that the time factor? Whoever made that call knew it would bring Lassington round here and that he’d discover Pariss dead. What was the idea?’

He looked at the two constables in turn. Neither was able to provide an answer.

‘Quite simple, gentlemen,’ Ironside said. ‘The murderer wanted Lassington round here to discover the body. Why? Because there was something he could rely on Lassington to do. What was that?’

‘Look here, sir –’ Peter began.

But Ironside interrupted him.

‘That stupid business with the tape-recorder and the time-plug on the fire,’ he snapped. ‘The plug had to be pulled out. That was the essence of the trick. It had to be pulled out the moment the body was found. Now why could the murderer rely on Police Constable Lassington to do that?’

He turned and looked at Peter as if he was willing the answer out of him.

But he got no answer.

‘Don’t know, sir,’ Peter said exhaustedly.

‘Oh, come, Lassington,’ Ironside said. ‘Stop pretending. You must see it all now.’

Peter shook his head.

Ironside stood up.

‘It could only be because Police Constable Lassington was the murderer,’ he said.

Sergeant Frollet moved half a pace to his right so that he stood in front of the door. Detective-Constable Spratt looked up as if in a deep well a sudden ray of light had cut down from above.

‘I warn you,’ Ironside said, ‘that anything you say from now on may be used in evidence.’

‘Thank you for nothing.’

‘Yes,’ Ironside went on, ‘you killed Pariss and left him lying there. On your way out you met Lindylou Twelvetrees – she said you looked put out, and no wonder – and you realized it was possible after all for other people to have been with Pariss. So you doubled back and broke in at that window there when Pariss was no longer in a position to hear the noise and you fixed up that alibi with the time-plug. But that meant you had to be sure of getting back to Pariss before anyone else came in. The notice on the door would keep them out for a while, so you grabbed hold of a certain Mr Sprogson, a dealer in dirty books and your particular snout. We heard he was hanging round the place from Mullens. And you told him to ring you at exactly one-thirty. You even made sure your wife took the call.’

‘It’s a lie,’ Peter burst out.

He looked round the narrow confining walls of the little office.

‘We’ve got proof,’ Ironside said. ‘I knew, of course, quite early on. But there wasn’t any point in acting till I had a little solid evidence.’

He looked over at Frollet.

‘Tell him, Sergeant,’ he said.

‘I’ve just been talking to Sprogson,’ said Frollet placidly. ‘He’ll swear to his part in court all right.’

‘In court,’ Peter shouted. ‘All this nonsense won’t look so clever then. Not when a jury ask themselves why on earth I should have wanted to kill Teddy Pariss.’

‘Motive doesn’t matter, as I’ve so often said,’ Ironside answered. ‘But you never really listened to me, did you? However, I can suggest what happened.’

‘Can you?’ Peter snarled.

‘I think you killed Pariss because you wanted to get hold of that mysterious letter from Fay Curtis,’ said Ironside. ‘After all, it did disappear, and you were the one in a position to make off with it. I imagine it was you who was blackmailing Fay. You certainly know how to use a Swiss bank, even if Mullens doesn’t. Of course Fay wouldn’t want her rather nasty activities to come out, even after her demise. It would make June’s career that much harder: nobody wants a Miss Globe from a criminal family. But I expect, like all of us, Fay wanted her revenge. So she wrote to her old friend, Teddy. He had some pretty unpleasant employees when I was a constable on this beat.’

He sighed heavily.

‘Strictly off the record,’ he went on, ‘I’ll even go so far as to hazard a guess that what made you blackmail old Fay in the first

place was an inordinate desire to go and live in some nauseous place like Hollywood. I suppose you saw yourself surrounded by dazzling and adoring women.'

'How did you know?'

'Only a guess. Based on what your wife told me about all those magazines you're so addicted to. You should have stuck to the *Police Gazette*, you know. It's not so pretty, but it's nearer the truth.'

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